

JULY, 1954

AMAZING STORIES

VOL. 28 NO. 3

AMAZING

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STORIES

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MANHATTAN MIRACLE
by Bill Peters

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STORIES

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JULY 1954
VOLUME 28 NUMBER 3

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY
Editorial and Executives Offices
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

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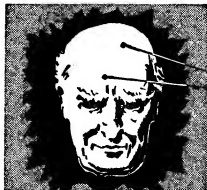
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At midnight Larry Taylor got hurriedly out of bed. He had to keep an appointment he didn't have with a girl he didn't know in a place he'd never heard of. For this was the night there was to be a—

MIRACLE IN MANHATTAN

BY BILL PETERS

HE CAME out of an apartment building in the East Sixties at midnight—into an apparently deserted street. He wore a black Homburg, carried the inevitable briefcase, and looked every inch the diplomat, the State Department career man. And his presence in the dimly-lit, deserted street added a touch of intrigue that was entirely in keeping. He looked in both directions, then stepped toward a small unobtrusive car parked at the curb.

But, quite suddenly, the street was no longer deserted. From somewhere in the shadows, there came two men—two slim efficient men who knew their business. They were on top of their victim before he realized what was happening. He had only an

instant to wonder—no time at all to resist—before a blackjack descended on his skull at just the right spot and with exactly the right amount of force. A quick blow, and two men were supporting a third after the manner of two friends escorting a drunk from a late party. In no time at all, they got keys from his pocket, put him in the car, got in with him, and the car rolled away into the night, down mysterious Manhattan streets.

The car rolled south, observing all traffic regulations, staying carefully within all speed limits, giving all other cars a wide berth so as to avoid even a possibility of trouble. Fifteen minutes later, it vanished into the maze of streets and alleys known as



Greenwich Village at the lower end of Manhattan Island.

The car arrived, eventually, in the rear of a dirty brownstone, where the two men half-led and half-carried the unfortunate diplomat into the building and up a dark, dirty stairway.

In a small apartment on the second floor, another man awaited their coming. He sat on a specially-built lounge nervously chewing a dead cigar. An ugly man, everything about him merited disgust.

His short, stubby body had long-since gone to fat. It hung in great folds upon his face until his eyes were mere slits through which he peered mistily. Glasses with thick, convex lenses were perched on a button of a nose, turning the pupils of his eyes to baleful pin-points. His body, a shapeless mass of blubber, was clad in shapeless, made-to-order clothing.

As the two kidnappers entered, he came off the lounge like a ball rolling onto the rug and formed the fat of his face into a scowl. "It took you long enough."

One of the kidnappers, a tall, blond man, scowled back. "What's the beef? We got him, didn't we?"

"Did you get the briefcase?"

"What do you think this thing is? A bass drum?"

"Don't get cute."

The blond man sneered as the fat one grabbed the case and clawed it open. His bulbous fingers trembled as he pulled out the contents. He threw the papers on the table and riffled through them until he found what he wanted—a large blue envelope sealed with red wax. He broke the seal and took forth a sheaf of onion skin paper covered with mathematical symbols. His little pig eyes gleamed behind the glasses. "This is it! I've got it! I've got it!"

The blond man was unimpressed. He glanced at his companion and then back at the fat man. "Okay. Let's settle up so we can get out of here."

The fat man looked up suddenly, as though he had completely forgotten the other two. "Oh, yes—certainly." He dug a fat wallet from the pocket of his tent-like pants. "There's something else, first," he said.

The blond man scowled. "Now listen! We made a deal and kept our end of it."

"Oh, I'm not trying to cheat you. In fact I'll make addi-

tional payment. I want you to kill Simmons and get rid of his body."

"Just like that, huh?"

The fat man shrugged. "Why not? You've killed before, haven't you?"

Hostility flared in both the kidnappers. The blond man said, "That's none of your damn business. Maybe we have and maybe we haven't."

"Don't get mad. I wasn't insulting you. I was just making a business proposition."

The blond man glanced at his companion, then jerked his head toward a far corner of the room. "We'll have a little conference."

"By all means," the fat man said, affably. As the two men moved away from him, he turned and bent down, with great effort, to a small safe standing by the table. He was smiling and a soft chirp of contentment escaped his thick lips. Sprawled on the lounge, the stricken diplomat opened glazed eyes and stared at the fat man. He watched the latter open the safe and put the blue envelope inside but the act did not appear to register in his stunned brain. The fat man closed the door of the safe and sighed expansively as he straightened. Then his glasses fell from his nose and his mood changed instantly to

that of a whining child. He said, "Craig—Craig—come here and help me, please. I dropped my glasses."

The blond man frowned from the far corner in which he was whispering to his companion. "Then pick the damn things up. I'm not your servant."

"I can't. I'm blind without my glasses. I don't dare even move. I'll step on them."

The man called Craig stared at the fat man in quizzical surprise. "You mean to say you're as helpless as that without your specs?"

"I said I was, didn't I? Come and find them for me."

The eyes of the diplomat on the couch closed slowly as Craig crossed the room. A few moments later, Craig said, "There they are—by your foot—there. Now keep them on your nose after this."

The fat man put on his glasses. "All right. Are you going to do as I ask?"

"No. We decided against it. There's been risk enough. If we stretch our luck we're liable to end up in the can. Give us what you promised and we'll be on our way."

The fat man shrugged. "Very well. But you can at least tie him up for me. He'll have to stay here a few hours

until I can make other arrangements."

"Okay. We'll do that much."

They tied the diplomat with his own belt and a towel from the bathroom. They were experts and did the job well. There would be no miraculous escape from this bondage.

"Put him on the bed in the next room, please. I won't be able to get rid of him for several hours."

The kidnappers deposited their bundle on the bed as directed. Then the blond man fingered the diplomat's head, not with any regret, but certainly with curiosity. "I guess I banged him pretty hard. His skull may be busted. They die sometimes, from that."

"You won't reconsider my offer?"

"We've made up our minds. Quit stalling."

"I had no intention of defrauding you," the fat man said, stiffly. Without further words, he handed the blond man a sheaf of bank notes. "Do you wish to count it?"

"You're damn right!" He counted carefully, pocketed the money, and grinned. "Okay. So long, now. And be sure to forget you ever knew us."

As they left, the fat man looked after them with open

contempt. "That won't be at all difficult," he said.

Larry Taylor awoke suddenly. It was a peculiar awakening in that it was more abrupt than usual. Larry was a heavy sleeper; the type who hated to go to bed and hated to get up. He invariably fought the wakefulness of morning. So it was surprising when he found himself abruptly conscious. He snapped on the light on the night table.

A small gold clock said two-thirty. Larry yawned and scowled. Why had he awakened at this unearthly hour? He threw back the covers and put his feet on the floor. He took a cigarette from a pack on the night table and lit it with an angry flourish of the table lighter. He was wide awake. Sleep was now out of the question. He sat smoking the cigarette, wondering. Had he gone to bed with something on his mind? Some worry? There was nothing he could think of. Everything was fine at the office. In fact he'd landed a big advertising account just the day before. Maybe that was it, he thought. But no; he'd landed accounts before and when the contracts were signed, forgot about them and went on to other

business. He was used to landing accounts.

Maybe it was—Oh, sure! He was due at Robb's Tavern in Greenwich Village. Past due. He'd have to hurry. He crushed out the cigarette and jerked off his pajamas. He didn't even stop to shower, but threw on his clothes, dashed cold water on his face, grabbed his hat and coat and headed for the garage in the basement of his apartment building. A couple of minutes later, his yellow coupe could have been seen cutting out of the side street and heading south on Fifth Avenue.

He found a parking place directly in front of Robb's Tavern down in the Village. He locked the car and went inside. It was an off-night. No orchestra, and not too many customers. A few couples at the bar. Near the door there sat two men—one a small dark nondescript individual, and the other, a tall blond man with a knife scar across his right cheek. As Larry entered, the blond man got up and collided with him.

Larry caught him, smiled. "Sorry."

"Think nothin' of it. Nothin' 't all." The man was drunk and jovial. He shuffled away toward the washroom and Larry forgot him.

Larry's eyes went immediately to the fourth table from the far end against the wall. He was to meet a tall, willowy girl with ash-blond hair and blue eyes. If she had arrived first, she should be seated at the table, waiting.

She had arrived first. She was sitting at the table. There was a Martini on the table in front of her, apparently untouched. She toyed at the stem of the glass with the long beautiful fingers of her right hand.

Larry walked down the room, seated himself across the table from her, and said, "Hello. Sorry I'm late."

She smiled, a trifle uncertainly. "That's quite all right."

Then Larry blinked and shook his head suddenly, as a fighter in the ring shakes his head after a hard blow. Larry said, "I'm—I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. This is absurd."

The girl appeared to be reacting in a similar manner. She said, "Yes—isn't it. I don't understand—"

Larry got up from his chair, but she extended her hand and he dropped back down. "Please—don't go yet. I—"

"Maybe you'd better take a crack at that Martini."

The girl raised the glass to

her lips; did so gratefully, realizing Larry had made the suggestion so that she might have time to gather her thoughts.

A waiter appeared beside the table. "Scotch and soda," Larry said without looking up. His eyes remained glued to the girl's face. She lowered the Martini glass and her smile was almost a plea. "I can't understand it," she said. "I got out of bed in the middle of the night thinking I had an appointment with a man about twenty-five; a man with brown eyes and black curly hair. I was to meet him here at Robb's at this table."

She took a deep breath and colored slightly. "You're here—at this table. A young man with curly black hair and brown eyes. Yet I don't know your name and I've never seen you before in my life."

Larry grinned, but there was little humor in the expression. "That's my story exactly, except I'd have to substitute a beautiful blonde with blue eyes."

Her color deepened. "Are we crazy?"

"I've been wondering. People do go out of their minds, of course, but—"

"But what?"

"I've never heard a case of two people doing it at the same time in the very same manner and—and, well, doing it together."

The girl took another sip from her glass. "Maybe it's the latest thing in abnormal behavior." She tried to speak lightly but her voice was tight.

The waiter brought Larry's drink, set it down, went away. They used the silence to study each other.

"I guess we can at least introduce ourselves," Larry said. "I'm Lawrence Taylor."

"My name is Patricia Morley."

"Fine. Now let's try and figure out what we're doing here."

She had a nice smile, but there was tension and doubt behind it. "You make it sound so easy."

Larry closed his eyes for a moment as a feeling of weariness came over him. Weariness—yet not that exactly. It was a mental thing rather than physical, and Larry sensed that it was not happening to him, but rather to someone else and that he was merely an observer; but so close an observer that he himself felt the tiring effect of the vast effort. But what effort? It was all so vague

and frustrating that Larry pushed it from his mind.

"We might start with some mutual investigation of ourselves," Larry said. "I'm an advertising man. Junior partner in a Madison Avenue firm—Hays, Collyn & Spencer. I'm single, twenty-six years old, and as normal as an advertising man can be—I guess."

Patricia Morley bit her lower lip with very white teeth. Larry thought: *If she's an actress, I'll bet those teeth are capped. Far too perfect.*

"I'm a designer. Women's clothes. I have a studio of my own on Fifth Avenue." She looked at Larry thoughtfully, colored slightly. "I'm twenty-five—single too. And I've always thought I was entirely sane, normal—until now."

Larry sighed. "Well, that doesn't get us anywhere, does it. Maybe we'd better just charge the whole thing off to 'boy meets girl' or something like that." But his attempt at the light touch failed somehow. Their mood and inner feelings were not conducive to humor.

"I guess we'd better just go home and try to forget being so foolish."

"Maybe you're right," Larry said. Then, "Wait a

minute. I wonder if we *have* met somewhere before. I'm sure we must have. Do you suppose we have any mutual friends. Do you ever attend Madison Avenue cocktail parties?"

Patricia shook her head. "No. Since I've been in New York I haven't had much time."

"How long have you been here?"

"A little over a year. I came from Washington, D. C."

"Hmmm. I've never been there. Tell me—did you ever come to this tavern before?"

"Yes. Twice. Both times with the same person. A friend of mine from Washington—" Her eyes grew a trifle vague. "Well, somewhat more than a friend. His name was John Simmons. He—"

"*John Simmons!*" Larry's eyes came up abruptly.

"Do you know him?"

"Of course. He's one of my best—"

Larry broke off sharply as though that particular train of thought had been wiped completely from his mind. He looked at his wristwatch. "We're late," he said, sharply. "We shouldn't be sitting here, Pat."

Pat Morley reached for her bag. "Of course not. We'll have to hurry."

They left the tavern. Outside, Larry said. "Do you have a car?"

"No. I came in a cab."

"Then we'll use mine."

They got in and Larry started the motor. He turned to Pat. "Do you know the address?"

"No—not exactly. But it's east, off Sheridan Square. I think I'd recognize the house, though."

Larry drove around the block and headed east. Two streets over, he turned right. He was aware of Pat beside him—the pleasant scent of her perfume—the warmth of her body. Her presence occupied only a small corner of his mind, however. Paramount, was the grim urgency of getting to the house off Sheridan Square; the fear that they would not find it; that his mental picture of it was not accurate. The fear that they would fail was stark and grim in his mind; yet his mind went no further than that.

It made no attempt to find the reason for the urgency nor the penalty for failure.

"Not the front of the house," Pat said. "The back entrance."

"That's right. There are

four garbage cans beside the gate."

"The alley is narrow. Just room enough to squeeze the car past the garbage cans."

"The sidewalk leading from the alley to the house is narrow and rough."

"Very rough. A chunk of the cement is gone about half-way in."

"The building has four floors—or is it five?" Pat turned her eyes from the street ahead to Larry's grim profile. "I'm not sure which it is."

"Five—definitely five."

"Yes—I'm sure you're right."

They drove in silence—into Sheridan Square. The area was deserted except for the inevitable night birds prowling from tavern to tavern. Larry turned left and began prowling also—among the crazy, twisting streets and alleys east of Sheridan Square.

"That looks like it," Pat said.

"No. There's a street lamp at the entrance to the alley."

"That's right. I forgot."

They turned and twisted for ten minutes in complete silence. Then Larry turned sharply off an arcing street into the mouth of a narrow alley. "This is it. The lamp

post and the narrow entrance. The ash can with the lid off."

Pat did not reply.

Larry drove slowly between the tight walls of looming buildings. This had to be it, he thought, grimly. If not—if not, what? A faint glimmering of the question tried to force through, but it was as though a hand had reached in to snatch it from his brain. This *had* to be it. That was all.

"The garbage cans," Larry said. He spoke with marked satisfaction and brought the car to a stop. "We found it. There's the house."

Pat sat quietly beside him. He turned to look at her. He reached out and took her hand. It was cold. "Pat—Pat! What's wrong?" Then he knew. Her eyes were closed. She had fainted.

Larry sat staring through the windshield. That strange weariness was again upon him. And the complete bewilderment as to his reasons for doing what he had done; being where he was.

Pat Morley, recovered from her fainting spell sat huddled beside him. She said, "I feel so tired—so terribly tired. Yet—"

"Yet it's not the way you've ever been tired before?"

"Yes. Impossible to explain somehow."

"I know what you mean. The question is—what kind of mad fools have we turned into. Sitting here in a Greenwich Village alley at three o'clock in the morning."

Pat turned her face toward him and passed a hand over her forehead. "It's as though somebody keeps turning something on and off—inside me. A terrible feeling. It scares me."

"I'm not exactly happy about it myself," Larry said, grimly. Absently, he took her cold hands in his. "Let's go back—"

"Back where? To the tavern?"

"Back to where we'd found a mutual acquaintance. Johnny Simmons. You were saying something about him."

Weariness stood revealed in Pat's eyes. "Oh yes. You were saying that you knew John."

"At one time we were very close—before he went into the diplomatic service. After that, he was pretty busy and we drifted apart."

"We were engaged at one time," Pat said.

"But you broke it off?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

She seemed uneasy—embarrassed. Larry said, "I

know it's personal, but I think you should tell me. It seems to be the only path we have to follow. God knows if it will lead anywhere, but we can't just sit here."

"You say you and John drifted apart. How long ago was that?"

"About four years, roughly. He went to Europe then and—"

"Not to Europe. India."

"I didn't know that. Of course diplomats don't advertise their comings and goings."

"Yes, it was India." Pat turned sharply and looked into Larry's face. "Larry, did you ever hear of Yoga?"

"Certainly. It's some kind of an Indian religion, isn't it?"

"I suppose you could call it a religion. It has to do with men in India—Masters, they call them—who can do miraculous things—walk on water—pass through solid walls."

"Yes, I've heard of it. A lot of foolishness of course—but what in the world did Yoga have to do with you and John Simmons?"

"We were to be married when John returned to this country from India. I remember I met him at the airport here in New York that day. A—a blushing bride-to-be —"

She stopped speaking and her eyes grew misty.

"—And?"

"It's rather hard to explain. After he returned from India, John had changed. It was as though something new had come into his life. Something big—vital—"

"Something more vital than marrying you?"

She smiled, a little sadly. "I'm afraid so."

"He grew cold?"

"No. If anything, he was more attentive and considerate than before. But, through no fault of his, I got the feeling his attention was impersonal, now—that he'd broadened and had a larger concept of life." She glanced up quickly. "I suppose that doesn't make much sense."

"It makes sense," Larry returned, soberly. "I talked to John once after he returned from Europe—or, as I thought, Europe. He was tremendously enthused about something he'd found. He called it a new concept of life that beggared timid approaches so common in our day. Those were very close to his exact words."

"He was talking about Yoga, of course. As nearly as I could discover, the teaching advances the theory that the

mind is all-powerful—that the average human uses only about ten percent of his mental powers.”

“He didn’t get as specific as that with me. He talked in glowing terms of a world beyond possibility of war, where the universal mind had taken over—I think that was what he called it.”

“The followers of Yoga believe we draw, or can draw, limitless power from the universal mind—I think that’s the way it goes.”

“I asked John if he was going to leave the diplomatic service. He said that he would eventually—as long as the time spent didn’t interfere with his greater personal work, he would continue to serve. I gathered, though, that he felt he’d found something more important.”

Patricia Morley shivered and the incongruity of the situation struck Larry. Two people sitting in an alley in Greenwich Village discussing the idiosyncrasies of a mutual friend while the city slept fitfully about them. But it was pleasant somehow, and restful. That odd vicarious weariness was again upon him and he had no urge to move.

Patricia said, “anyhow, our marriage plans died from neglect for want of a better

way to put it. We just didn’t talk about them—a sort of unspoken agreement.”

“Then you came to know, in your heart, that you and John would never marry.”

“Yes, I realized he had lost interest. In plain words, I felt his interest had switched over to this Yoga business.”

“I’m sorry that—” Larry stopped suddenly. The weariness was gone. Gone too, was any interest in John Simmons, Patricia Morley, or anyone else. He said, “Why are we sitting here. The envelope is in the safe. We must get it.”

“Of course. A blue envelope.”

He helped her from the car, then said, “Perhaps you’d better wait here.”

Patricia ignored the suggestion. “The combination,” she said, “is two turns right from zero to seven. One turn left to—to—”

“Twenty-one,” Larry said with some sharpness. “Let’s get along.”

“And right until the dial clicks.” Patricia followed him up the walk.

“There’s the broken place,” Larry said.

Patricia glanced down at it, as though it weren’t very important, and they went up the

back stairs to the third floor. They went through a doorway that led into a long, musty hallway that ran to the front of the building. A small bulb in the ceiling at each end, threw dim, sickly light on dirty plaster and dirty green doors.

They walked up the hall and stopped before one of the doors. Larry glanced at Patricia, "This is it." And she nodded, neither of them at all surprised by their ability to locate one door—exactly like seven others in the hall—and know it was the right one.

Larry turned the knob slowly. "Locked," he whispered. "I'll have to break it down."

"Be careful."

"Let's hope it gives on the first try. Otherwise we may be in for trouble."

"It doesn't look very strong."

Larry backed across the narrow hall, turned sidewise, and pointed his shoulder at the door panel. "Here goes," he whispered.

Soberly, Patricia held up two crossed fingers. Larry hit the door with everything he had. The lock snapped like a piece of rotten string. The door flew open.

A fat, formless monster of a man sat on a chair in front of a small table. He looked

up in sudden fright and surprise. He had evidently been using the telephone and had been in the act of cradling the instrument. His hand came away from the phone and snaked toward his hip pocket. It moved with surprising speed for one so fat, but Larry moved fast also. He was across the room and upon the man as the gun came out of his pocket.

Larry caught the huge wrist and twisted. It was a little like seizing upon the fat-laden haunch of a prize hog. The fat turned under his hands and the man grinned as he brought the gun around. Larry twisted backwards, out of range and brought his knee up hard, into the fat man's side. The latter winced in sudden pain.

Taking advantage of the momentary laxness in the arm, Larry twisted with all his strength. This brought the man's gun hand around and within reach of Larry's foot. Larry kicked out viciously, once, and the gun skipped across the floor.

Larry dropped the arm and stepped toward it, but the fat man was not as helpless as he appeared. He was up off the chair and diving toward Larry like an enraged bull. Larry had just time to turn

and meet the savage attack head-on.

He might just as well have met a locomotive in the same manner. He backpedalled and went down under the fat man, felt the sudden weight of the great bulk enfold him and hold him helpless. His struggles were useless.

He felt the fat man's hands settle on his throat. They squeezed down. There were muscles hidden beneath that fat and now they were going into action. The room swam before Larry's eyes. A gray wave drifted in from somewhere, growing darker with each second.

Then the pressure of the hands relaxed.

As consciousness flooded back, Larry opened his eyes to see Patricia's smooth ankles close to his face. He looked up to her white tense face—saw one hand extended, holding the gun with which she had hit the fat man at the base of his skull.

"He—he was killing you," she said.

Larry pushed the dead weight off and got shakily to his feet. "You're right. I guess he was. It was like fighting a mountain."

He pushed hair back out of his eyes as Patricia pointed.

"There's the safe—where the blue envelope is."

"Of course." Larry crossed the room and knelt down by the small iron safe. He glanced back over his shoulder. "The combination was—?"

"Start at zero. Two turns to—"

"Wait! It's—it's open!"

The discovery shocked Larry. "It shouldn't be open," he said, scowling. "It—"

Patricia Morley was on her knees beside him. Her eyes were large and dark as she peered into the safe. Then her hands went inside—in a kind of frenzy. They came out empty and she turned to look at Larry.

"The blue envelope isn't here! The safe is empty!"

Larry got slowly to his feet. He staggered as though from a blow. And his mind was stunned in the same manner it would have been from a savage drive to the chin. The room turned before him and he shook his head dully.

Never in his life had he received such a shock as this—and for no reason he could fathom. A grim and genuine shock, yet, along with it, that same feeling that it wasn't happening to him, but rather, to someone else and he was but an observer. It was as

though he were experiencing the sensation vicariously, and yet he was obviously the principal involved. It was bewildering, confusing — and terrifying.

And, in the middle of the mental maelstrom whirling in his mind—in the midst of the pure panic brought on by the terrible revelation of the empty safe, there came strange new visions.

He was on a cold bleak plain in the middle of a snow storm. Sleet whined across the land cutting his face, numbing him with cold. The scene changed instantly and he was in a huge cave high in the side of a mountain. There was a fire burning in the middle of the cave and several calm beautiful men seated in a circle thereabout. "The Hima-layas," he muttered as he stood transfixed.

Then the scene changed to one of madness. He and Pat were tiny creatures on the top of a desk. He was chasing her, trying to stab her with the pen that lay, even now, on the fat man's desk.

Larry was jerked back to reality and saw Patricia Morley standing beside him, her face white and tense. "Larry, what's the matter. What's happened to us, Larry?"

"You felt it too?"

"I—I don't know. Suddenly I was terribly afraid. And it was so cold in here. I don't know why."

He took her hand. "It wasn't cold in here, Pat. That frigid blast you felt came from halfway across the world. Let's get out of here."

She obeyed without question.

As they went through the door into the hall, the fat man still remained motionless on the floor.

Pat looked drawn and tired. She said, "Larry—in heaven's name, what kind of madness have we become involved in?"

"I think I'm beginning to get a faint idea," Larry said.

"Then tell me."

"You'd think I was crazy."

She smiled thinly. "Who am I to call anybody crazy after what I've done tonight?"

He helped her into the car and put an arm around her. She leaned close to him and seemed grateful for the warmth of his body. He said, "I think we were sent here, tonight, Pat. I think John Simmons sent us here after something—after the blue envelope."

"I guess that's as good an explanation as any. I've had the feeling all along that I

had nothing to do with it myself."

"When we found the envelope gone, I had a strange vision. I was in a cave and I knew the cave was in India. There were some men there and I knew they were Masters."

She looked up into his face. "Maybe that was—"

"Let me finish. I've had an idea all evening—all night—that another mind was guiding us; that we were sent on this mission by a mind capable of doing such a thing."

"But this dream you had—of the cave—"

"I don't think it was a dream. I think that up to the point where we reached the safe, John Simmons was in command of our minds—was directing us. Then, when the envelope wasn't there, he lost control momentarily—or perhaps for good—and for a while I was in *his* mind—seeing what he saw—knowing what he knows."

"I can't grant any of this, Larry. I've got to refuse to believe it. One of us has to stay sane—one of us has to stay on the hard ground of reality."

"I'm beginning to wonder what's real and what isn't."

"I'll grant, for a moment, that what you said is true. All

right then, what was the sense to it. Say John did bring us here. If he did he'd have to be a far smarter individual than either of us. Would anyone that smart send us off on a midnight trip like this that makes absolutely no sense?"

"We can't be sure it didn't make sense. One thing I'm certain of—John expected the envelope to be in that safe. It wasn't there, so I've got a hunch he won't be sending us anyplace else."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't think he knows where the blue envelope is. He wouldn't know where else to send us."

"Then we can go home and forget about this nightmare?"

"I guess so. I guess that's the only thing to do."

"I can't say I'm sorry."

Larry started the motor. "I don't think you told me where you live," he said.

She did not answer. He turned and found her looking at him thoughtfully. "If we could only find the blond man with the scar. He was there by the safe when—"

Larry held the wheel rigidly. "Of course. The fat man had lost his glasses. Craig—that was his name—he—" Larry jammed down on the gas and the car hurtled out of

the alley. "A blond man with a scar. It could be the same one. It *has* to be. Hold on Pat. We're going back to the tavern where I met you."

"Why, Larry?"

"I saw a man when I went in. A blond man with a scar on his face. There can't be too many like that, even in Greenwich Village. Let's hope he's still there."

They traveled in silence after that and were fortunate in not bumping into any roaming prowling cars. In silence until Pat looked at her watch and said, "We're too late, Larry. There won't be anyone there. It's just after hours."

"What time is it?"

"Two—three minutes after four."

"There may still be time. They don't serve drinks after four, but it takes people a little while to get out."

As they pulled up beside Robb's Tavern, the customers were leaving in ones, twos, and in groups. "There," Pat said. "Two men—one of them is blond." She pointed to where two men, their arms on each other's shoulders, were staggering along the street.

"That's him," Larry said, grimly. "I hope."

"He looks familiar to me," Pat said, slowly, "but I don't

remember seeing him before."

"You probably didn't. But John Simmons did."

They watched the two men move along the sidewalk. Half a block east, they crossed in the middle of the street and came over to the side on which Larry was driving. The car crept along behind them, turned the corner where they turned—pulled up, four blocks on, when the two men stopped, apparently to say good night.

They took quite a time at this, slapping each other on the back and evidently swearing undying loyalty. Then the shorter man turned into an apartment entrance and the tall blond man staggered on his way.

He turned in a block further on, and by the time he was through the foyer door, Larry was out of the car and close behind him. The man turned and grinned. Larry grinned back. The blond man said, "Hi, neighbor."

Larry said, "Hi."

The man bowed elaborately and said, "You fir—first."

"Oh no. You. I insist."

The man's foolish grin deepened. "Ver' well. Thank you." He moved up the stairs to the third floor. There he took out a key, unlocked the

door and seemed to forget about Larry until the weight of the latter's shoulder sent him hurtling into the room.

Larry found the light switch before Craig knew quite what had happened. Craig rolled over, saw Larry standing in the doorway, and started to rise. By the time he had reached his feet, he was sober. "Who the hell you think you are?"

"I want the envelope—the blue envelope."

Craig sneered. "I'll give you an envelope. I'll break your goddam skull!"

He charged across the room. He slammed head-on into a perfectly timed right. He went down.

"I want that envelope."

Craig roared and came up through a red haze. "I'll kill you—you son—"

Larry brought up his knee and connected just below Craig's belt buckle. Craig doubled over. Larry took Craig's head in his hands and smashed his face down on the same knee. Craig gagged. Larry took him by the shirt-front and smashed a fist into his face. Craig went down, blood spouting from his nose.

"The envelope—the blue one."

"Well, you don't have to get so rough," Craig whimpered.

"I was just trying to make a buck. A guy's got a right to make a buck."

"Give me the envelope—now—or I'll maim you for life. I'm not kidding."

"Sure—sure—it's in the drawer there." Craig cowered on the floor as Larry took the blue envelope from the drawer, turned and walked out of the apartment.

Twenty minutes later, Larry handed Patricia Morley back her pen. "That ought to do it," he said. He had written *The Secretary of State, Washington, D. C. Personal Important!* "Guess that will make it all right," and he got out of the car and dropped the letter in a box near the main post office. When he came back, he said, "Now I'm going to take you home. You still haven't given me the address."

That afternoon at three, Larry met Patricia at a restaurant off Times Square. He said, "You saw the papers?"

"Yes, they found him—there in that apartment—dead."

"He must have been there when we were. And still alive."

"Oh, Larry. What are we going to do?"

"Nothing, I think."

"Nothing? But we should—"

"The government is probably already on the trail of the fat man—maybe Craig too. But I've given it some thought and I don't think John would want us to do any more. If he had he'd have given us orders."

"To think he was right there—all the time!"

Larry nodded soberly. "Yes—he could have saved his own life, probably, by just calling to us, but all he wanted was to get the blue envelope back into the proper hands. He gave us instructions and we followed them. I think we ought to let the government carry on from here. After all, there's nothing more we could

do to help. We don't know anything they don't—or won't find out."

"Very well, if you say so, Larry."

"When we were there in the apartment," Larry said softly, "he was dying. I'm sure of it."

"How do you know?"

"Because of the disjointed pictures he threw into my mind—our minds. I saw that cave in the mountains. Then I was a tiny midget, trying to kill you on a vast table."

"I didn't get that last one."

He smiled. "But one thing—I think John would want me to see you once in a while—sort of keep an eye on you."

She smiled back. "I've no objections—none at all."

THE END



"—in love with you—you—you—"

BREAKFAST AT TWILIGHT

BY PHILIP K. DICK

It's distinctly ungood to wake up in the middle of a war. Anybody knows that. But what bothered the McLeans most was the fact that the war they were in wouldn't begin for another hundred years!

"DAD?" Earl asked, hurrying out of the bathroom, "you going to drive us to school today?"

Tim McLean poured himself a second cup of coffee. "You kids can walk for a change. The car's in the garage."

Judy pouted. "It's raining."

"No it isn't," Virginia corrected her sister. She drew the shade back. "It's all foggy, but it isn't raining."

"Let me look." Mary McLean dried her hands and came over from the sink. "What an odd day. Is that fog? It looks more like smoke. I can't make out a thing. What did the weather man say?"

"I couldn't get anything on the radio," Earl said. "Nothing but static."

Tim stirred angrily. "That darn thing on the blink again? Seems like I just had it fixed."

He got up and moved sleepily over to the radio. He fiddled idly with the dials. The three children hurried back and forth, getting ready for school. "Strange," Tim said.

"I'm going." Earl opened the front door.

"Wait for your sisters," Mary ordered absently.

"I'm ready," Virginia said. "Do I look all right?"

"You look fine," Mary said, kissing her.

"I'll call the radio repair place from the office," Tim said.

He broke off. Earl stood at the kitchen door, pale and silent, his eyes wide with terror.

"What is it?"

"I—I came back."

"What is it?" Are you sick?"

"I can't go to school."

They stared at him. "What is wrong?" Tim grabbed his son's arm. "Why can't you go to school?"

"They—they won't let me."

"Who?"

"The soldiers."

It came tumbling out with a rush. "They're all over. Soldiers and guns. And they're coming here."

"Coming? Coming here?" Tim echoed, dazed.

"They're coming here and

they're going to—" Earl broke off, terrified. From the front porch came the sound of heavy boots. A crash. Splintering wood. Voices.

"Good Lord," Mary gasped. "What is it, Tim?"

Tim entered the living room, his heart laboring painfully. Three men stood inside the door. Men in gray-green uniforms, weighted with guns and complex tangles of equipment. Tubes and hoses. Meters on thick cords. Boxes and leather straps and antennae. Elaborate masks locked over



their heads. Behind the masks Tim saw tired, whisker-stubbed faces, red-rimmed eyes that gazed at him in brutal displeasure.

One of the soldiers jerked up his gun, aiming at McLean's middle. Tim peered at it dumbly. *The gun*. Long and thin. Like a needle. Attached to a coil of tubes.

"What in the name of—" he began, but the soldier cut him savagely off.

"Who are you?" His voice was harsh, guttural. "What are you doing here?" He pushed his mask aside. His skin was dirty. Cuts and pocks lined his sallow flesh. His teeth were broken and missing.

"Answer!" a second soldier demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"Show your blue card," the third said. "Let's see your Sector number." His eyes strayed to the children and Mary standing mutely at the dining room door. His mouth fell open.

"A woman!"

The three soldiers gazed in disbelief.

"What the hell is this?" the first demanded. "How long has this woman been here?"

Tim found his voice. "She's my wife. What is this? What—"

"Your wife?" They were incredulous.

"My wife and children. For God's sake—"

"Your wife? And you'd bring her here? You must be out of your head!"

"He's got ash sickness," one said. He lowered his gun and strode across the living room to Mary. "Come on, sister. You're coming with us."

Tim lunged.

A wall of force hit him. He sprawled, clouds of darkness rolling around him. His ears sang. His head throbbed. Everything receded. Dimly, he was aware of shapes moving. Voices. The room. He concentrated.

The soldiers were herding the children back. One of them grabbed Mary by the arm. He tore her dress away, ripping it from her shoulders. "Gee," he snarled. "He'd bring her here, and she's not even stung!"

"Take her along."

"Okay, Captain." The soldier dragged Mary toward the front door. "We'll do what we can with her."

"The kids." The captain waved the other soldier over with the children. "Take them along. I don't get it. No masks. No cards. How'd this house miss getting hit? Last

night was the worst in months!"

Tim struggled painfully to his feet. His mouth was bleeding. His vision blurred. He hung on tight to the wall. "Look," he muttered. "For God's sake—"

The captain was staring into the kitchen. "Is that—is that *food*?" He advanced slowly through the dining room. "Look!"

The other soldiers came after him, Mary and the children forgotten. They stood around the table, amazed.

"Look at it!"

"Coffee." One grabbed up the pot and drank it greedily down. He choked, black coffee dripping down his tunic. "Hot. Jeeze. Hot coffee."

"Cream!" Another soldier tore open the refrigerator. "Look. Milk. Eggs. Butter. Meat." His voice broke. "It's full of food."

The captain disappeared into the pantry. He came out, lugging a case of canned peas. "Get the rest. Get it all. We'll load it in the snake."

He dropped the case on the table with a crash. Watching Tim intently, he fumbled in his dirty tunic until he found a cigarette. He lit it slowly, not taking his eyes from Tim. "All right," he said. "Let's hear what you have to say."

Tim's mouth opened and closed. No words came. His mind was blank. Dead. He couldn't think.

"This food. Where'd you get it? And these things." The captain waved around the kitchen. "Dishes. Furniture. How come this house hasn't been hit? How did you survive last night's attack?"

"I—" Tim gasped.

The captain came toward him ominously. "The woman. And the kids. All of you. What are you doing here?" His voice was hard. "You better be able to explain, mister. You better be able to explain what you're doing here—or we'll have to burn the whole damn lot of you."

Tim sat down at the table. He took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to focus his mind. His body ached. He rubbed blood from his mouth, conscious of a broken molar and bits of loose tooth. He got out a handkerchief and spat the bits into it. His hands were shaking.

"Come on," the captain said.

Mary and the children slipped into the room. Judy was crying. Virginia's face was blank with shock. Earl stared wide-eyed at the soldiers, his face white.

"Tim," Mary said, putting her hand on his arm. "Are you all right?"

Tim nodded. "I'm all right."

Mary pulled her dress around her. "Tim, they can't get away with it. Somebody'll come. The mailman. The neighbors. They can't just—"

"Shut up," the captain snapped. His eyes flickered oddly. "The mailman? What are you talking about?" He held out his hand. "Let's see your yellow slip, sister."

"Yellow slip?" Mary faltered.

The captain rubbed his jaw. "No yellow slip. No masks. No cards."

"They're geeps," a soldier said.

"Maybe. And maybe not."

"They're geeps, Captain. We better burn 'em. We can't take any chances."

"There's something funny going on here," the captain said. He plucked at his neck, lifting up a small box on a cord. "I'm getting a polic here."

"A polic?" A shiver moved through the soldiers. "Wait, Captain. We can handle this. Don't get a polic. He'll put us on 4 and then we'll never—"

The captain spoke into the box. "Give me Web B."

Tim looked up at Mary. "Listen, honey. I—"

"Shut up." A soldier prodded him. Tim lapsed into silence.

The box squawked. "Web B."

"Can you spare a polic? We've run into something strange. Group of five. Man, woman, three kids. No masks, no cards, the woman not stung, dwelling completely intact. Furniture, fixtures, and about two hundred pounds of food."

The box hesitated. "All right. Polic on his way. Stay there. Don't let them escape."

"I won't." The captain dropped the box back in his shirt. "A polic will be here any minute. Meanwhile, let's get the food loaded."

From outside came a deep thundering roar. It shook the house, rattling the dishes in the cupboard.

"Jeez," a soldier said. "That was close."

"I hope the screens hold until nightfall." The captain grabbed up the case of canned peas. "Get the rest. We want it loaded before the polic comes."

The two soldiers filled their arms and followed him through the house, out the front door. Their voices diminished as they strode down the path.

Tim got to his feet. "Stay here," he said thickly.

"What are you doing?" Mary asked nervously.

"Maybe I can get out." He ran to the back door and unlatched it, hands shaking. He pulled the door wide and stepped out on the back porch. "I don't see any of them. If we can only . . ."

He stopped.

Around him gray clouds blew. Gray ash, billowing as far as he could see. Dim shapes were visible. Broken shapes, silent and unmoving in the grayness.

Ruins.

Ruined buildings. Heaps of rubble. Debris everywhere. He walked slowly down the back steps. The concrete walk ended abruptly. Beyond it, slag and heaps of rubble were strewn. Nothing else. Nothing as far as the eye could see.

Nothing stirred. Nothing moved. In the gray silence there was no life. No motion. Only the clouds of drifting ash. The slag and the endless heaps.

The city was gone. The buildings were destroyed. Nothing remained. No people. No life. Jagged walls, empty and gaping. A few dark weeds growing among the debris. Tim bent down, touch-

ing a weed. Rough, thick stalk. And the slag. It was metal slag. Melted metal. He straightened up—

"Come back inside," a crisp voice said.

He turned numbly. A man stood on the porch behind him, hands on his hips. A small man, hollow-cheeked. Eyes small and bright, like two black coals. He wore a uniform different from the soldiers'. His mask was pushed back, away from his face. His skin was yellow, faintly luminous, clinging to his cheek bones. A sick face, ravaged by fever and fatigue.

"Who are you?" Tim said.

"Douglas. Political Commissioner Douglas."

"You're—you're the polic," Tim said.

"That's right. Now come inside. I expect to hear some answers from you. I have quite a few questions."

"The first thing I want to know," Commissioner Douglas said, "is how this house escaped destruction."

Tim and Mary and the children sat together on the couch, silent and unmoving, faces blank with shock.

"Well?" Douglas demanded.

Tim found his voice. "Look," he said. "I don't

know. I don't know anything. We woke up this morning like every other morning. We dressed and ate breakfast—"

"It was foggy out," Virginia said. "We looked out and saw the fog."

"And the radio wouldn't work," Earl said.

"The radio?" Douglas' thin face twisted. "There haven't been any audio signals in months. Except for government purposes. This house. All of you. I don't understand. If you were geeps—"

"Geeps. What does that mean?" Mary murmured.

"Soviet general-purpose troops."

"Then the war has begun."

"North America was attacked two years ago," Douglas said. "In 1958."

Tim sagged. "1958. Then this is 1960." He reached suddenly into his pocket. He pulled out his wallet and tossed it to Douglas. "Look in there."

Douglas opened the wallet suspiciously. "Why?"

"The library card. The parcel receipts. Look at the dates." Tim turned to Mary. "I'm beginning to understand now. I had an idea when I saw the ruins."

"Are we winning?" Earl piped.

Douglas studied Tim's wal-

let intently. "Very interesting. These are all old. Seven and eight years." His eyes flickered. "What are you trying to say? That you came from the past? That you're time travelers?"

The captain came back inside. "The snake is all loaded, sir."

Douglas nodded curtly. "All right. You can take off with your patrol."

The captain glanced at Tim. "Will you be—"

"I'll handle them."

The captain saluted. "Fine, sir." He quickly disappeared through the door. Outside, he and his men climbed aboard a long thin truck, like a pipe mounted on treads. With a faint hum the truck leaped forward.

In a moment only gray clouds and the dim outline of ruined buildings remained.

Douglas paced back and forth, examining the living room, the wall paper, the light fixtures and chairs. He picked up some magazines and thumbed through them. "From the past. But not far in the past."

"Seven years."

"Could it be? I suppose. A lot of things have happened in the last few months. Time travel." Douglas grinned ironically. "You picked a bad

spot, McLean. You should have gone farther on."

"I didn't pick it. It just happened."

"You must have done *something*."

Tim shook his head. "No. Nothing. We got up. And we were—here."

Douglas was deep in thought. "Here. Seven years in the future. Moved forward through time. We know nothing about time travel. No work has been done with it. There seem to be no evident military possibilities."

"How did the war begin?" Mary asked faintly.

"Begin? It didn't begin. You remember. There was war seven years ago."

"The real war. This."

"There wasn't any point when it became—this. We fought in Korea. We fought in China. In Germany and Yugoslavia and Iran. It spread, farther and farther. Finally the bombs were falling here. It came like the plague. The war *grew*. It didn't begin." Abruptly he put his notebook away. "A report on you would be suspect. They might think I had the ash sickness."

"What's that?" Virginia asked.

"Radio-active particles in

the air. Carried to the brain. Causes insanity. Everybody has a touch of it, even with the masks."

"I'd sure like to know who's winning," Earl repeated. "What was that outside? That truck. Was it rocket propelled?"

"The snake? No. Turbines. Boring snout. Cuts through the debris."

"Seven years," Mary said. "So much has changed. It doesn't seem possible."

"So much?" Douglas shrugged. "I suppose so. I remember what I was doing seven years ago. I was still in school. Learning. I had an apartment and a car. I went out dancing. I bought a TV set. But these things were there. The twilight. This. Only I didn't know. None of us knew. But they were there."

"You're a Political Commissioner?" Tim asked.

"I supervise the troops. Watch for political deviation. In a total war we have to keep people under constant surveillance. One Commie down in the Webs could wreck the whole business. We can't take chances."

Tim nodded. "Yes. It was there. The twilight. Only we didn't understand it."

Douglas examined the books in the bookcase. "I'll

take a couple of these along. I haven't seen fiction in months. Most of it disappeared. Burned back in '57."

"Burned?"

Douglas helped himself. "Shakespeare. Milton. Dryden. I'll take the old stuff. It's safer. None of the Steinbeck and Dos Passos. Even a polic can get in trouble. If you stay here, you better get rid of *that*." He tapped a volume of Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

"If we stay! What else can we do?"

"You want to stay?"

"No," Mary said quietly.

Douglas shot her a quick glance. "No, I suppose not. If you stay you'll be separated, of course. Children to the Canadian Relocation Centers. Women are situated down in the undersurface factory-labor camps. Men are automatically a part of Military."

"Like those three who left," Tim said.

"Unless you can qualify for the id block."

"What's that?"

"Industrial designing and Technology. What training have you had? Anything along scientific lines?"

"No. Accounting."

Douglas shrugged. "Well, you'll be given a standard

test. If your IQ is high enough you could go in the Political Service. We use a lot of men." He paused thoughtfully, his arms loaded with books. "You better go back, McLean. You'll have trouble getting accustomed to this. I'd go back, if I could. But I can't."

"Back?" Mary echoed. "How?"

"The way you came."

"We just—came."

Douglas halted at the front door. "Last night was the worst rom attack so far. They hit this whole area."

"Rom?"

"Robot operated missiles. The Soviets are systematically destroying continental America, mile by mile. Roms are cheap. They make them by the million and fire them off. The whole process is automatic. Robot factories turn them out and fire them at us. Last night they came over here—waves of them. This morning the patrol came in and found nothing. Except you, of course."

Tim nodded slowly. "I'm beginning to see."

"The concentrated energy must have tipped some unstable time-fault. Like a rock fault. We're always starting earthquakes. But a *time quake* . . . Interesting. That's

what happened, I think. The release of energy, the destruction of matter, sucked your house into the future. Carried the house seven years ahead. This street, everything here, this very spot, was pulverized. Your house, seven years back, was caught in the undertow. The blast must have lashed back through time."

"Sucked into the future," Tim said. "During the night. While we were asleep."

Douglas watched him carefully. "Tonight," he said, "there will be another rom attack. It should finish off what is left." He looked at his watch. "It is now four in the afternoon. The attack will begin in a few hours. You should be undersurface. Nothing will survive up here. I can take you down with me, if you want. But if you want to take a chance, if you want to stay here—"

"You think it might tip us back?"

"Maybe. I don't know. It's a gamble. It might tip you back to your own time, or it might not. If not—"

"If not we wouldn't have a chance of survival."

Douglas flicked out a pocket map and spread it open on the couch. "A patrol will remain

in this area another half hour. If you decide to come undersurface with us, go down this street this way." He traced a line on the map. "To this open field here. The patrol is a Political unit. They'll take you the rest of the way down. You think you can find the field?"

"I think so," Tim said, looking at the map. His lips twisted. "That open field used to be the grammar school my kids went to. That's where they were going when the troops stopped them. Just a little while ago."

"Seven years ago," Douglas corrected. He snapped the map shut and restored it to his pocket. He pulled his mask down and moved out the front door onto the porch. "Maybe I'll see you again. Maybe not. It's your decision. You'll have to decide one way or the other. In any case—good luck."

He turned and walked briskly away from the house.

"Dad?" Earl shouted, "are you going in the Army? Are you going to wear a mask and shoot one of those guns?" His eyes sparkled with excitement. "Are you going to drive a snake?"

Tim McLean squatted down and pulled his son to

him. "You want that? *You want to stay here?* If I'm going to wear a mask and shoot one of those guns we can't go back."

Earl looked doubtful. "Couldn't we go back later?"

Tim shook his head. "Afraid not. We've got to decide now, whether we're going back or not."

"You heard Mr. Douglas," Virginia said disgustedly. "The attack's going to start in a couple of hours."

Tim got to his feet and paced back and forth. "If we stay in the house we'll get blown to bits. Let's face it. There's only a faint chance we'll be tipped back to our own time. A slim possibility—a long shot. Do we want to stay here with roms falling all around us, knowing any second it may be the end—hearing them come closer, hitting nearer—lying on the floor, waiting, listening—"

"Do you really want to go back?" Mary demanded.

"Of course, but the risk—"

"I'm not asking you about the risk. I'm asking you if you really want to go back. Maybe you want to stay here. Maybe Earl's right. You in a uniform and a mask, with one of those needle guns. Driving a snake."

"With you in a factory-la-

bor camp! And the kids in a Government Relocation Center! How do you think that would be? What do you think they'd teach them? What do you think they'd grow up like? And believe . . ."

"They'd probably teach them to be very useful."

"Useful! To what? To themselves? To mankind? Or to the war effort . . ."

"They'd be alive," Mary said. "They'd be safe. This way, if we stay in the house, wait for the attack to come—"

"Sure," Tim grated. "They would be alive. Probably quite healthy. Well, fed. Well-clothed and cared for." He looked down at his children, his face hard. "They'd stay alive, all right. They'd live to grow up and become adults. But what kind of adults? You heard what he said! Book burnings in '57. What'll they be taught from? What kind of ideas are left, since '57? What kind of beliefs can they get from a Government Relocation Center? What kind of values will they have?"

"There's the id block," Mary suggested.

"Industrial designing and Technocracy. For the bright ones. The clever ones with imagination. Busy slide-

rules and pencils. Drawing and planning and making discoveries. The girls could go into that. They could design the guns. Earl could go into the Political Service. He could make sure the guns were used. If any of the troops deviated, didn't want to shoot, Earl could report them and have them hauled off for reeducation. To have their political faith strengthened—in a world where those *with* brains design weapons and those *without* brains fire them."

"But they'd be alive," Mary repeated.

"You've got a strange idea of what being alive is! You call that alive? Maybe it is." Tim shook his head wearily. "Maybe you're right. Maybe we should go undersurface with Douglas. Stay in this world. Stay alive."

"I didn't say that," Mary said softly. "Tim, I had to find out if you *really* understood why it's worth it. Worth staying in the house, taking the chance we won't be tipped back."

"Then you want to take the chance?"

"Of course! We *have* to. We can't turn our children over to them—to the Relocation Center. To be taught how to hate and kill and de-

stroy." Mary smiled up wanly. "Anyhow, they've always gone to the Jefferson School. And here, in this world, it's only an open field."

"Are we going back?" Judy piped. She caught hold of Tim's sleeve imploringly. "Are we going back now?"

Tim disengaged her arm. "Very soon, honey."

Mary opened the supply cupboards and rooted in them. "Everything's here. What did they take?"

"The case of canned peas. Everything we had in the refrigerator. And they smashed the front door."

"I'll bet we're beating them!" Earl shouted. He ran to the window and peered out. The sight of the rolling ash disappointed him. "I can't see anything! Just the fog!" He turned questioningly to Tim. "Is it always like this, here?"

"Yes," Tim answered.

Earl's face fell. "Just fog? Nothing else? Doesn't the sun shine ever?"

"I'll fix some coffee," Mary said.

"Good." Tim went into the bathroom and examined himself in the mirror. His mouth was cut, caked with dried blood. His head ached. He felt sick at his stomach.

"It doesn't seem possible," Mary said, as they sat down at the kitchen table.

Tim sipped his coffee. "No. It doesn't." Where he sat he could see out the window. The clouds of ash. The dim, jagged outline of ruined buildings.

"Is the man coming back?" Judy piped. "He was all thin and funny-looking. He isn't coming back, is he?"

Tim looked at his watch. It read ten o'clock. He reset it, moving the hands to four-fifteen. "Douglas said it would begin at night-fall. That won't be long."

"Then we're really staying in the house," Mary said.

"That's right."

"Even though there's only a little chance?"

"Even though there's only a little chance we'll get back. Are you glad?"

"I'm glad," Mary said, her eyes bright. "It's worth it, Tim. You know it is. Anything's worth it, any chance. *To get back*. And something else. We'll all be here together . . . We can't be—broken up. Separated."

Tim poured himself more coffee. "We might as well make ourselves comfortable. We have maybe three hours to wait. We might as well try to enjoy them."

At six-thirty the first rom fell. They felt the shock, a deep rolling wave of force that lapped over the house.

Judy came running from the dining room, face white with fear. "Daddy! What is it?"

"Nothing. Don't worry."

"Come on back," Virginia called impatiently. "It's your turn." They were playing Monopoly.

Earl leaped to his feet. "I want to see." He ran excitedly to the window. "I can see where it hit!"

Tim lifted the shade and looked out. Far off, in the distance, a white glare burned fitfully. A towering column of luminous smoke rose from it.

A second shudder vibrated through the house. A dish crashed from the shelf, into the sink.

It was almost dark outside. Except for the two spots of white Tim could make out nothing. The clouds of ash were lost in the gloom. The ash and the ragged remains of buildings.

"That was closer," Mary said.

A third rom fell. In the living room the windows burst, showering glass across the rug.

"We better get back," Tim said.

"Where?"

"Down in the basement. Come on." Tim unlocked the basement door and they trooped nervously downstairs.

"Food," Mary said. "We better bring the food that's left."

"Good idea. You kids go on down. We'll come along in a minute."

"I can carry something," Earl said.

"Go on down." The fourth room hit, farther off than the last. "And stay away from the window."

"I'll move something over the window," Earl said. "The big piece of plywood we used for my train."

"Good idea." Tim and Mary returned to the kitchen. "Food. Dishes. What else?"

"Books." Mary looked nervously around. "I don't know. Nothing else. Come on."

A shattering roar drowned out her words. The kitchen window gave, showering glass over them. The dishes over the sink tumbled down in a torrent of breaking china. Tim grabbed Mary and pulled her down.

From the broken window

rolling clouds of ominous gray drifted into the room. The evening air stank, a sour, rotten smell. Tim shuddered.

"Forget the food. Let's get back down."

"But—"

"Forget it." He grabbed her and pulled her down the basement stairs. They tumbled in a heap, Tim slamming the door after them.

"Where's the food?" Virginia demanded.

Tim wiped his forehead shakily. "Forget it. We won't need it."

"Help me," Earl gasped. Tim helped him move the sheet of plywood over the window above the laundry tubs. The basement was cold and silent. The cement floor under them was faintly moist.

Two rooms struck at once. Tim was hurled to the floor. The concrete hit him and he grunted. For a moment blackness swirled around him. Then he was on his knees, groping his way up.

"Everybody all right?" he muttered.

"I'm all right," Mary said. Judy began to whimper. Earl was feeling his way across the room.

"I'm all right," Virginia said. "I guess."

The lights flickered and dimmed. Abruptly they went out. The basement was pitch black.

"Well," Tim said. "There they go."

"I have my flashlight." Earl winked the flashlight on. "How's that?"

"Fine," Tim said.

More rums hit. The ground leaped under them, bucking and heaving. A wave of force shuddering the whole house.

"We better lie down," Mary said.

"Yes. Lie down." Tim stretched himself out awkwardly. A few bits of plaster rained down around them.

"When will it stop?" Earl asked uneasily.

"Soon," Tim said.

"Then we'll be back?"

"Yes. We'll be back."

The next blast hit them almost at once. Tim felt the concrete rise under him. It grew, swelling higher and higher. He was going up. He shut his eyes, holding on tight. Higher and higher he went, carried up by the ballooning concrete. Around him beams and timbers cracked. Plaster poured down. He could hear glass breaking. And a long way off, the licking crackles of fire.

"Tim," Mary's voice came faintly.

"Yes."

"We're not going to—to make it."

"I don't know."

"We're not. I can tell."

"Maybe not." He grunted in pain as a board struck his back, settling over him. Boards and plaster, covering him, burying him. He could smell the sour smell, the night air and ash. It drifted and rolled into the cellar, through the broken window.

"Daddy," Judy's voice came faintly.

"What?"

"Aren't we going back?"

He opened his mouth to answer. A shattering roar cut his words off. He jerked, tossed by the blast. Everything was moving around him. A vast wind tugged at him, a hot wind, licking at him, gnawing at him. He held on tight. The wind pulled, dragging him with it. He cried out as it seared his hands and face.

"Mary—"

Then silence. Only blackness and silence.

Cars.

Cars were stopping nearby. Then voices. And the noise of footsteps. Tim stirred, pushing the boards

from him. He struggled to his feet.

"Mary." He looked around. "We're back."

The basement was in ruins. The walls were broken and sagging. Great gaping holes showed a green line of grass beyond. A concrete walk. The small rose garden. The white side of the stucco house next door.

Lines of telephone poles. Roofs. Houses. The city. As it had always been. Every morning.

"We're back!" Wild joy leaped through him. *Back.* Safe. It was over. Tim pushed quickly through the debris of his ruined house. "Mary, are you all right?"

"Here." Mary sat up, plaster dust raining from her. She was white all over, her hair, her skin, her clothing. Her face was cut and scratched. Her dress was torn. "Are we really back?"

"Mr. McLean! You all right?"

A blue-clad policeman leaped down into the cellar. Behind him two white-clad figures jumped. A group of neighbors collected outside, peering anxiously to see.

"I'm okay," Tim said. He helped Judy and Virginia up. "I think we're all okay."

"What happened?" The

policeman pushed boards aside, coming over. "A bomb? Some kind of a bomb?"

"The house is a shambles," one of the white-clad interns said. "You sure nobody's hurt?"

"We were down here. In the basement."

"You all right, Tim?" Mrs. Hendricks called, stepping down gingerly into the cellar.

"What happened?" Frank Foley shouted. He leaped down with a crash. "God, Tim! What the hell were you doing?"

The two white-clad interns poked suspiciously around the ruins. "You're lucky, mister. Damn lucky. There's nothing left upstairs."

Foley came over beside Tim. "Damn it, man! I *told* you to have that hot water heater looked at!"

"What?" Tim muttered.

"The hot water heater! I told you there was something wrong with the cut-off. It must've kept heating up, not turned off . . ." Foley winked nervously. "But I won't say anything, Tim. The insurance. You can count on me."

Tim opened his mouth. But the words didn't come. What could he say? —No, it wasn't a defective hot water

heater that I forgot to have repaired. No, it wasn't a faulty connection in the stove. It wasn't any of those things. It wasn't a leaky gas line, it wasn't a plugged furnace, it wasn't a pressure cooker we forgot to turn off.

It's war. Total war. And not just war for me. For my family. For just my house.

It's for your house, too. Your house and my house and all the houses. Here and in the next block, in the next town, the next state and country and continent. The whole world, like this. Shambles and ruins. Fog and dank weeds growing in the rusting slag. War for all of us. For everybody crowding down into the basement, white-faced, frightened, somehow sensing something terrible.

And when it really came, when the five years were up, there'd be no escape. No going back, tipping back into the past, away from it. When it came for them all, it would have them for eternity; there would be no one climbing back out, as he had.

Mary was watching him. The policeman, the neighbors, the white-clad interns—all of them were watching him. Waiting for him to explain. To tell them what it was.

"Was it the hot water heater?" Mrs. Hendricks asked timidly. "That was it, wasn't it, Tim? Things like that do happen. You can't be sure..."

"Maybe it was home brew," a neighbor suggested, in a feeble attempt at humor. "Was that it?"

He couldn't tell them. They wouldn't understand, because they didn't want to understand. They didn't want to know. They needed reassurance. He could see it in their eyes. Pitiful, pathetic fear. They sensed something terrible—and they were afraid. They were searching his face, seeking his help. Words of comfort. Words to banish their fear.

"Yeah," Tim said heavily. "It was the hot water heater."

"I thought so!" Foley breathed. A sigh of relief swept through them all. Murmurs, shaky laughs. Nods, grins.

"I should have got it fixed," Tim went on. "I should have had it looked at a long time ago. Before it got in such bad shape." Tim looked around at the circle of anxious people, hanging on his words. "I should have had it looked at. Before it was too late."

THE END

This time they sent the wrong man to prison. Oh, he was guilty enough; no denying that. But he knew that iron bars and stone walls are only as thick and as high as earthbound minds make them.

COMMAND PERFORMANCE

BY ROBERT K. WHITE

FOR thirty-seven years Horace Wingate lived a quiet but not too hopeless existence in the town of Allenbrook. On his thirty-eighth birthday he entered State Prison as a convicted felon.

Allenbrook was one of those pitiable little towns where each house was much like another—a large expanse of lawn, a fragment of garden, a smaller amount of modern comfort—and where there was no business like a neighbor's business. Where every newcomer was watched, talked about, and accepted or rejected as carefully as though it were an FBI security screening.

For twenty years Horace Wingate had devoted his life to building a secure future, as well as a gratifying

present, for his wife and daughter. His gradual rise to a major executive position in the bank had not been without hard endeavor and it brought to him most of the things his moderate taste desired.

Although it actually made no difference he sometimes thought ruefully of how much more there might have been were it not for his wife's expenditures. Mrs. Wingate, a product of a somewhat less than middle-income family, had been ambitious from the beginning. From the moment of her marriage to Horace she had designs on becoming the social leader of the community, and there can be little more insidious, or more demanding on a modest purse, than small town society. But Horace's affection was such



that he could deny her nothing, nor bring himself to a point of cordial discussion on the probabilities of reducing their expenses.

So there came a time when, simultaneously, Mrs. Wingate attained the social heights as the accepted leader of Allenbrook's Mayfair and Horace Wingate reached the limit of his ready cash. There were numerous solutions to the problem but he was bound by an overwhelming and criminal love for his wife and offspring. So Horace embezzled the funds he needed. Not too much, not too little; an amount precisely sufficient to meet his financial obligations.

They arrested him at the bank. Of those who daily professed undying friendship for "good old Horace" not one came forward to effect his release on bail. In lieu of a bond he was remanded to the county jail to wait trial.

Eight days passed before his wife came to visit him, and only then with her eyes brimming with tears and a single question on her lips: "Oh, Horace, how could you do such a thing to me?"

He told her. Never touching upon the fact that her spending had driven him to despair he told her briefly and con-

tritely. He had merely run out of cash, he said, and short of mortgaging their home, or selling the car, or liquidating what he held in government bonds he could do nothing else if he were to meet current expenses.

She was surprised and dismayed by the confession. He had always seemed as impregnable and secure as Fort Knox. But she had come prepared, nevertheless, and produced papers for his signature which would place in her name all they owned. The house, the car, the bonds, everything.

She sobbed and cried uncontrollably as he signed the papers. But she took the various properties. She had no further use for him and would not have allowed him in the house again, but she took the properties and felt there should have been more. And she went directly from the jail to the office of a lawyer and retained him to institute divorce proceedings.

It was Horace Wingate's birthday when he entered prison to begin the sentence imposed by an unrelenting judge. He was photographed, fingerprinted, weighed and measured. Idly he wondered if it was going to continue indefinitely. They'd done the

same thing in the police precinct station, at police headquarters and in the county jail.

Horace was assigned a number and his clothes were replaced by prison garb. He watched numbly as his old identity was hauled away and he barely heard the question of the officer on the receiving desk.

"Do you want your clothes sent home or shall we give them to the Salvation Army?"

"Home?" Horace asked dully. "No, not home. I've never had a home."

The officer's voice acquired a kindlier tone. "Too bad," he said. "But cheer up. You've got one now."

Horace permitted himself the luxury of a small smile and was aware that it was the first time he had smiled in many weeks.

The reaction began when he was locked in a cell. Until then he had not seriously thought of what it would be like. In the time which had elapsed between his arrest and eventual conviction he had been shuttled from a precinct lockup to police headquarters and then to the county detention jail. From there he was frequently transported to the courthouse for

preliminary hearings. Additionally there were visits to the office of the district attorney where they took statements from him; visits to the office of the probation department where they delved into his past for information which might aid to the judge in passing sentence; a visit to a doctor's office where he was given a physical check; a visit to the office of a psychiatrist where he was examined for any evidence of insanity. Horace Wingate remained dazed and detached throughout the proceedings, unable to comprehend that they were all steps leading to a lone logical conclusion.

He had been unwilling and unprepared to accept the finality of the situation, believing there would yet be some occurrence to set life right again. It was not until they closed behind him the door of Cell 29, Block A, State Prison, that he realized he would see nothing beyond this for many years to come.

The most difficult to endure at first was the harrowing passage of time, the emptiness of each hour, each minute. He paced the cell daily and stared for great lengths of time at the walls. Barely legible in one corner near the ceiling was a penciled name and date,

left by another unfortunate who had halted here for a spell in the distant past. It was an old date and Horace became irked with the knowledge that the walls had not received a fresh coat of paint in so many years. They should paint places more often than that. Even prison cells.

The inmate in the cell next to his was a subscriber to the Allenbrook newspaper, one of the few privileges allowed a convict. If you had funds on deposit in the prison office you might enter a subscription to the newspaper of your choice. Horace had no funds but he didn't think he'd want a newspaper anyway. What difference did it make what happened in the world outside when you were no longer a part of it?

But Horace reasoned that he should converse with someone on occasion. And though the fellow in the next cell had not appeared to be the friendly type Horace made an attempt at acquaintance-ship one afternoon as the newspapers were being distributed.

"What's the news in the paper today?" he asked genially.

"The usual," the fellow said. "Prices will be coming

down, prices will keep going up. You have a choice."

The reply was made in a manner to discourage a friendly atmosphere and Horace abandoned further overtures.

He found this to be distressing. In former days he would have gone out of his way to cultivate friendships, even of men such as this next door neighbor who obviously did not want friendship. But he was changing, he knew that now. He was becoming cynical, and with cynicism came a feeling of independence. No longer did he need help or friendship. He would never need it again. And he had to laugh when he thought of how sure were the psycho-analytical fellows that childhood was the only real stage in the development of the human being.

Sure, there were all kinds of humble adages and homely platitudes which said no man is an island, you can't walk alone, et cetera, et cetera. But philosophy is only fine for past or future ills, never for present ones, and he sat in his cell with nothing to do but think.

Of what could Horace Wingate think? It was too disturbing to remember the past. The future was so distant and

uncertain. The present was a void, like so many days and years completely removed from one's life. So, for the lack of anything better, he let his thoughts drift to his almost forgotten theory of "teleportation."

It was his own word, "teleportation," and if asked to define it he would undoubtedly have called it "mind over matter." That was the simple way he always thought about it, for it had been a topic of curiosity but not of importance.

Horace was a confirmed believer in the utter supremacy of the human brain. It was all powerful, he contended, and its power had been but slightly tapped. Hypnotism was an accepted scientific phenomenon. Extrasensory perception, or what used to be known as mental telepathy, was steadily becoming recognized. And now the parapsychologists were talking about psychokinesis, their term for the power to influence events by nonphysical means, such as a gambler "willing" the fall of the dice.

Horace had dreamed much farther. He had thought of the brain as an instrument capable of emitting waves to propel inert material through

space without visible motive power. Later he had dared to think of a living creature, perhaps even a human, being "teleported" in a twinkling merely by commanding it. This, he reasoned, would be a process involving complete disintegration of the body in its present location with instantaneous reassembly in whatever far place it was desired to reach.

In the beginning he had confided his theory to no one. As he grew bolder he had discussed the possibilities with friends.

"That," they said, "would be the greatest thing since the invention of the egg-beater."

After that he kept his theories to himself. He felt sorry for those whose powers were below par, but he was particularly irked by their refusal to accept the evidences of their extrasenses. He compared them with those who declined to look through Galileo's telescope.

Now in his prison cell, because he wished not to ponder other things, Horace began to think seriously about his theory. And late one evening as he lay on his cot he tried his first experiment.

The electric light bulbs which burned constantly were

spaced at regular intervals in the cellblock and it was Horace's poor fortune to have one directly outside his door. The illumination which streamed into the cell throughout the night made sleeping difficult. He had often wished that the light might burn out and afford him a single peaceful night's rest before it was replaced the next day. Well, why not try to *make* it burn out!

He devoted himself to the task with single-minded efficiency. He stared fixedly at the bulb, for fifteen minutes exerting all his power of concentration upon extinguishing that pesty light.

Suddenly the light went out!

"Coincidence," he muttered and went to sleep, grateful nonetheless for the darkened cell.

The bulb was replaced the following day. In the evening Horace focused his thoughts anew on extinguishing the fresh globe. He was not amazed when it, too, went dark, but rather surprised that it required no more than three minutes of intense concentration on his part.

Again a new light bulb was substituted for the useless one and again Horace forced it to burn out in the evening, this

time in a matter of seconds. He felt slightly shaken as he perceived that this hitherto untried power of his mind was not only effective but was becoming stronger each time it was used. From now on he must be extremely careful.

A crew from the prison's electrical shop inspected the light fixture for faults. Although they found none they replaced it with another, "just to be on the safe side," and Horace resolved to desist from further trials with the bulbs. It could get him into trouble with the authorities. They might think he possessed some sort of appliance which aided him in destroying the bulbs as fast as they were replaced.

Moreover, he must now determine if this power was sufficiently potent to remain effective when expended over greater distances. Far down the cellblock was a window overlooking the desk of the guard stationed there on duty. Though it was entirely removed from his sight Horace decided he would attempt to crack a pane of glass in this window.

He spent ten minutes of that evening in converging his will upon the objective. He had no means of knowing if he were immediately success-

ful and was concerned with awaiting the morning when he might see for himself.

As the men lined up for the breakfast march to the mess hall Horace was in a state of uncertainty. He was anxious to know if the experiment had succeeded, yet fearing to know because of an apprehension of failure. His excitement increased as the marching line came closer to the window and he kept his eyes on the floor until he was exactly opposite the guard's desk. Then he shot a quick glance to the wall above.

The window's bottom pane of glass was diagonally cracked by an almost perfect line extending from the upper right corner to the lower left!

Horace sat in the prison yard during the convict's short period of afternoon recreation and was pleased with himself. Now certain of his power to a limited degree he contemplated further tests to increase its effectiveness. It was still a long time to the day when he would attempt the grave task of "teleportation" but he felt sure of eventual success. And what a day it would be! When, with nothing more than the power of his mind commanding it,

he would propel himself from the confines of this accursed fortress.

Yet a slight tinge of sadness colored these thoughts. It wouldn't be pleasant to leave behind some of the men he had met. As time passed within the walls Horace had developed a few friendships finer than any known in his free days. Ironical though it was, he could not help admitting that some of the men in the prison—quite a number, in fact—were better men than those with whom he had come in contact on the outside. They'd had their adversities and now they were social castaways, but it did not prevent them from being real men.

Just as he, they loathed their present existence, cursed and hated, turned white as a November frost from lack of sun. They lived alike, exploited, bitter, confused, but still hopeful, and never went out of their way to get on each other's nerves. He would miss them.

The weeks passed. The sun lay hazily in the glowing west as summer gave way to the crisp days of autumn. Early in October the rains began and the year turned gray. All night and most of the day it beat upon the roof of the cell-

block and gurgled along the eaves.

One evening as Horace lay listening to the drumming of the raindrops he idly began concentrating upon splitting the water pipe of a drinking fountain located in the recreation yard. In the morning while marching to breakfast the men were compelled to detour around the stream of water escaping from the broken pipe.

Horace could find no motive for the latest of his tests. Why had he done it? He knew beforehand that he would be successful so what was he trying to prove? And why did all his experiments take the form of destructive feats? Burning out bulbs, cracking window glass, splitting water pipes. Did he do these things in an effort to strike back at authority?

He didn't think so. He had no cause to dislike the guards or the higher prison officials. They were fair, they were good to him and gave no trouble. It was not easy to serve a prison term but they made it as painless as possible.

He was confused, and as he pondered he stroked gently the scar on his left hand. It was a one-inch blemish, the souvenir of a mishap with

a broken bottle when he had been but a child. It had fascinated him at the time and he was constantly touching it, feeling the smoothness of the place where the injury had mended. The gesture had been carried subconsciously into his adult days and was now an unfailing sign of perplexity. Whenever he became engrossed deeply in questioning thought he would come out of his reverie to find himself stroking the scar. He had tried to break the habit and never succeeded.

The winter withdrew and the days grew much longer. Spring was close at hand and with the rebirth of the earth came a renewal of Horace's dream of "teleporting" himself to freedom. If it was ever to be attempted it must be done soon. He realized the longer he delayed the greater would grow his timidity, for he was becoming a bit fearful of the consequences should the experiment be even remotely successful.

What would it do to the senses, the body? Would there be pain, or perhaps even physical damage? There was but one way to know. If you dared to dream you must also dare to face the dangers and disappointments blocking the

path to be taken in pursuit of the dream.

On an evening in April he faced the situation squarely. He lay on his bed and knew it to be the night he would make the attempt. There was indecision at first. Where should he go; what place should he try to reach? Then he knew. For a beginning it would be wise to make it someplace close at hand. Across the corridor was an empty cell. He would try to "teleport" himself into the vacant cubicle.

When the cellblock had grown quiet, asleep for the night, he began commanding his body to move across the corridor. He stood at his cell door, hands grasping the bars, in a mighty effort of concentration.

When it happened he did not know. One split second he had been in his own cell and then he was in another across the hall. There had been no feeling of movement, no awareness of even the smallest segment of elapsed time. He had kept his eyes open throughout and had not seen any evidence to indicate a flight through space.

He was exultant. It worked! His theory had been sound!

Then he was apprehensive.

Suppose it would not work again. Suppose he couldn't get back. If he were found in this cell in the morning there could be no explanation and he would face disciplinary action. Frantically he commanded that he be back in his rightful location.

Breathing a sigh of relief he sank to a sitting position on the cot in his own cell. But it was only a momentary reaction. As the realization came upon him that he had successfully completed the round trip his former exultation was puny when compared to his present feeling of triumph. Trembling, eager as a child absorbed with a new toy, Horace began a night long series of experiments.

He knew the location of every vacant cell in the block and moved back and forth between them. As before, he tried it with his eyes open and failed to note any evidence of movement. Then he concentrated with closed eyes, opening them to find himself in a different place without having had the slightest awareness of motion.

Eventually he wished himself back to his own cell. Mentally exhausted, but jubilant with success, he fell on his cot and slept deeply.

He awakened in the morning supremely content. Aware that he had won his freedom he deliberated on the best way to mold it into a thing of security.

As the guard went by, taking the morning count of the prison population, Horace had a roguish idea. The guard had just checked him as being present and accounted for. Now, suppose he were to move himself to one of the vacant cells before the guard reached it. And then on to another empty cell before that one was checked! He immediately dismissed the thought as pure folly but had to chuckle as he pictured the resultant confusion it would bring.

Taking into account every possible contingency Horace began making his plans. Most important was the selection of a place to go. He couldn't return to Allenbrook, he knew that. Aside from the fact that his illegal presence there would soon be uncovered, he had other good reasons. He no longer had a wife and family, he had no friends. Nobody in Allenbrook wanted him and Horace knew he didn't want them.

No other place in the entire country appealed to him so he finally settled on South Amer-

ica. He had always wanted to visit South America, a wish which had never been fulfilled. Furthermore, he was aware of a certain small republic there whose laws permitted no criminal extradition. The latter was a point to be seriously considered in the event something went wrong after his arrival.

With this paramount point surmounted he proceeded accordingly. He would not, he decided, go as a United States citizen. To forestall any possibility of recognition even in such a remote area, he would go as a true native of the country he had chosen as a haven. The greatest obstacle would be his appearance, but that could be changed. He was prepared to cope with the language for he had been a keen Spanish student in his school days and could brush up on the subject in the prison library.

There was the business of an appropriate name, too, but that came easily. He remembered once handling a mortgage through the bank for a family named Montejo. It would do well enough. A common given name—say, something like Juan—and that was that.

In all his waking hours

thereafter he thought of himself as Juan Montejo. He dieted religiously and brought his weight down to a point where his body acquired the slim hardness of the typical Spanish physique. He grew a thin, pencil-line mustache in the manner of the Spaniard. He spent every possible minute of outdoor recreation in the summer sunshine until his skin was burned a rich brown. Once he left the prison his complexion could be maintained by short daily exposure to the rays of a sun lamp.

He diligently pored over Spanish grammars in the library. He read and reread all the books containing information on the country he planned to make his home; its geography, its customs, its politics, everything. He associated himself with a half-dozen inmates of the prison who had emigrated from South America and conversed with them in their mother-tongue, assiduously watching their every action and mannerism.

He studied himself as Juan Montejo. He *became* Juan Montejo. Except for the times when he was obliged to answer to the name of Horace Wingate in the course of normal prison routine, he had

forgotten such a person ever existed. And when the summer breezes yielded to the sharp winds of autumn he was ready.

It would be spring now south of the equator. A wonderful time, the best possible time for beginning a new life, making new friends, setting his sights on new goals.

On a night in late October he stood at the bars of his cell, took a deep breath and closed his eyes. With a half-remembered prayer of childhood upon his lips he began concentrating on spanning the hundreds and hundreds of miles intervening between incarceration in the United States and freedom in South America.

In the morning a guard looked into the empty cell. After several more guards had checked every possible hiding place in the prison, and all means of locating the convict within the walls had been exhausted, the authorities notified all law enforcement agencies that Horace Wingate had escaped.

How he had managed it they could not tell. There were no keys missing, no physical damage to any of the several locks barring the way to freedom. And even granting that the prisoner had

somehow succeeded in getting outside the walls, how could he have escaped detection in the densely populated area adjacent to the big stronghold?

They did not know. Only Horace Wingate could have explained it and he was never found.

The morning light also entered the Penitenciarario de San Sabas and the prisoners stirred to wakefulness. In a cell on the eastern side Juan Montejo yawned and stretched his arms. He went to his small window and looked outside to the early morning sunshine and the haze which shrouded the foothills of the distant Andes mountains. It was going to be a fine day.

A guard came strolling leisurely along the corridor, making the morning checkup on the occupants of the various cells. Unlike the grim atmosphere usually pervading the prisons of the United States, here was a feeling of comradeship between inmate and keeper. The guard had a greeting, a bit of repartee for each man as he passed. At length he stood outside the cell of Juan Montejo.

"Ho!" he exclaimed. "And what have we here!"

"A good morning to you, senor," said Juan.

"So? A good morning to you. But how come you here?"

"How come I here?"

"Yes. Yes." The guard was impatient. "Who are you, and what are you doing in this cell?"

Juan was perplexed. "Senor, you joke."

"I do not joke, my friend."

The guard's voice grew loud. "Tell me this instant. What are you doing in this cell?"

"Please, senor. I am Juan Montejo, am I not? I have been in this cell now these past two years. I shall, alas, be here for many more yet to come."

The guard was no longer friendly. "Attention, little one. This is an empty cell. Or it should be. It has been unoccupied for a week of seven days. It was unoccupied when I finished my duty yesterday."

"Oh, no, senor. This cannot be. You are mistaken."

"We shall see soon enough," he flung at Juan as he strode away.

Making his way quickly to the end of the cellblock he joined his assistant and excitedly told him about the man in Cell 74, not accounted for on their lists.

The second guard waved a

hand to dismiss his associate's anxiety. "Easily explained," he said. "Did we not get a group of men yesterday, transferred from the prison in the mountains."

"We did, certainly."

"So! This is yet another. Most likely brought here after we had gone home yesterday afternoon. Those sons of a swine on the night watch forgot to enter his name on the list."

"But," demurred the first guard, "this new prisoner says he has been here now for two years."

"My dear friend, have you not worked here long? And have you not seen too many of these unfortunate fellows with . . ." He put a finger to his head and revolved it in vacant circles.

The first guard grinned foolishly.

"Of course. Well, let us enter this name of Juan Montejo in the records and be about our work."

In his cell Juan shook his head sadly. That poor prison keeper was going out of his mind. Ah, well. Too bad, but Juan Montejo had his own troubles. There was a sentence to be served and until

it was done he must worry his way while remaining apart from all the good things of so beautiful a world. Oh, hasten the day!

Actually he had no worries of consequence. The time passed and he seemed unconcerned. He was a good prisoner and got along well with the other inmates. The only time he appeared troubled was when he would awake in the morning from a dream which was in the habit of recurring about once each week.

Juan Montejo had never been in the United States. He had never known a desire to visit this strange and distant land. Yet, he was frequently being plagued by a dream that he was an *Americano del Norte*, imprisoned some place up there instead of here in South America.

Juan was a great believer in dreams being a portent of the future. They always troubled and perplexed him. Were these present unexplained dreams an omen of something good? Or of something bad? He considered gravely as he absently stroked the one-inch scar on his left hand.

THE END



THE SQUIRRELS

BY GERRY GREENSTREET

Men in the attic? The police thought it was a switch on the "man-under-the-bed" gag. Their mistake sealed their own doom.

I LOOKED down at my hands and wished, not for the first time, that they were white and young and pretty. Men will do things to humor a young and pretty woman, whether they believe her or not. But I was old and alone—my husband long since dead, and my children all grown up now and none living nearby.

Feeling like a fool didn't help, either.

I hoped someone had brought up this assistant to the county attorney to treat old ladies with kindness and courtesy. I looked up at his

impatient face and lost what hope I had.

"There are men in my attic," I blurted.

"Your tenants?" he asked, politely, but the narrow suspicious look of the ward-heeler settled down over his weasel face.

"No," I said. "I rent the first floor to a young couple named Forster, and live on the second myself. I'm not too old to climb stairs yet, and I need that much exercise. There's nobody in the attic but—them."

I knew I sounded like I had lost my wits, but somehow

the thoughts of them made me shiver, and no woman has good sense when she's scared.

"You mean strangers? Trespassers? Someone unknown to you?"

I nodded. What else could I mean?

"You say more than one? Then you've seen them?" I could tell he didn't believe I'd done any such thing. And of course, I hadn't.

"I can hear them talking to each other."

He sat back in his chair and gave me this condescending little smile, full of every smutty joke he'd ever heard about lonely women who worried about burglars. "You mean they shout? Has your tenant heard them?" And the smile turned into a leer.

All these young people think that everybody over sixty is deaf, just because so many older people stop paying attention to what's going on around them. But I do pay attention, and besides, I've always had extra-sharp hearing. My grandson in Ohio, the one that's practically a genius, likes this high-fidelity music, and he was amazed at what high vibrations I could hear on his test records. He laughed and said, "There are some vibrations that men can't hear, only dogs and a

few women—but Gramma's one of those women."

"The tenants? Why, there's a whole floor between them and the noises—how could they hear anything?" I asked the county attorney's young man. "But my ears are still sharp. And I can certainly hear what's going on in my attic right above me! I can hear them moving around and rustling things; and I can hear them murmur and whistle and chatter, although I can't make out what they say."

His face closed up over the disbelief and scorn he couldn't hide quick enough. So he was putting me down as a doddering old woman with my second childhood upon me!

"I'll have the sheriff send an investigator out," he said. "They are short in men, though, and they might be a few days getting around to it."

That meant I might as well have saved myself this trip to the courthouse—I'd wait a long time before I saw those investigators at my door. This man wanted only to get rid of me.

I pay my property taxes like anyone else, and it made me mad to be brushed aside this way. So—I know it was

wicked, but I told him a story.

"The only time I was pretty sure I understood them," I said, "it sounded like this man's voice saying, 'Shut up, Royster, the old dame'll hear us!' It kind of frightened me."

I took pains not to look at him too sharply, but I could see him stiffen just a little. They'd have received thousands of reports that someone had seen or heard Royster, I knew. But the father of the little girl he murdered was offering a huge reward, and ward-heelers have grown no less greedy since my husband was a judge.

I may be senile, but I wasn't stupid enough to smile. Someone would find time to look in my attic after all.

"You may be sure we'll investigate, Mrs. Lassiter. Let's just see who's available right now."

He left, and came back with two big fellows and a little rat-faced, jumpy man. They kept saying they didn't believe it could be Royster, but just the same, they loosened their guns in their holsters every minute or two.

The three investigators and I went up to the second floor of my house together. I showed them the door to the narrow attic stair I'd had built after my husband died,

because I didn't feel called upon to climb a ladder every time I wanted to look over the things in my trunks.

They opened the stair door.

I could hear a little high-pitched rustling and then a scurrying of small feet. The two big men looked at each other, disgusted because those little feet couldn't be Royster.

"Squirrels," the fat one said. "They're thick in this part of town—all those big oaks."

"Might's well go on up, since we're here," said the rat-faced man.

They went up the stair cautiously, and I followed.

The air under the eaves shimmered, like the shimmer of heat waves in midsummer. But the day was cool.

And I can't say that I *heard* anything. I only felt that if I'd just listen harder, I *could* hear it. It would sound like the distant soprano whine of machines moving fast enough to make a blur—like an electric fan transposed up three octaves and muted almost to silence.

If the men noticed anything, they gave no sign.

The tall ones stooped under the low ceiling. They looked behind the old wardrobe chests and the trunks. The fat

one took hold of the handle of the big trunk that was my mother's, and hefted.

"Geez," he said. "What you got in this, lady?"

"Old papers of my husband's, and some of his books."

"Must weigh a ton!"

"It's extra-large, as you see. And it's solidly constructed."

"Nothing here," said the rat-faced one, with a final look around.

Then I screamed.

You could see it plainly. Any woman would have noticed it, but men are so blind. I pointed to the floor and screamed again.

All three of them stared at me, and even in my terror, I realized that I had to get hold of myself, unless I wanted to spend the rest of my days in an insane asylum.

"The—the floor!" I managed to say.

They exchanged significant glances.

"I don't see nothing," said the fat one, soothingly.

"It's been swept! Don't you see? There isn't any dust!"

They looked. No dust, no dusty footprints where we walked.

I clung to the fat one, shuddering.

For a moment, I could feel it—they wondered if I just possibly might be sane, after all.

Then the rat-faced one shook his head. "Now, now, lady," he said crossly, "you sure you didn't just sweep that floor yourself? You're a real good housekeeper, I bet." He winked at the others.

You could hear them take their breaths in again.

"No!" I cried. "Oh, no! I never sweep up here. Once a year, in the fall, I have help come in and move all this and sweep. I'm not strong enough myself, and so much dust makes me cough."

"I reckon you must 'a' just swept it after all, and forgot, lady," the rat-faced one said. "A good housekeeper like you, you could do it kinda like a habit, and then forget all about it."

Behind their law-officer stolidity, all three faces looked satisfied.

"It's a darn cinch them squirrels didn't sweep it," said the thinner of the big ones, and laughed.

They helped me down the stair politely—after all, I was a voter and my house is in a nice neighborhood and well kept-up. They shut the stair door behind me—and the

scurrying and whispering began again.

"Them squirrels!" said the fat man.

They went on downstairs, and I'm sure they thought themselves out of earshot.

I heard the rat-faced man say, with heavy sarcasm, "You know, boys, it really wasn't the old dame swept that floor, and it wasn't them squirrels, neither." I could sense his narrow grin.

"What was it then, Butch?" asked one of the others, ready to hear the joke.

"It was them green men from one of them flying saucers."

They all laughed, appreciatively.

Next day I went to see Merrill Courtney. He'd been my husband's law clerk, and afterward his partner. I didn't know what he could do for me, but an attorney has ways, and young Courtney had taken care of my business ever since my husband died. . . . And I felt I had to do *something*.

He let me tell my story, and then called the county attorney's office.

I watched his face while he listened to them on the phone. He understands how to look impassive, but I've known

him a long time, and my hands began to tremble.

He hung up the phone and tried to soften the facts with kind words. But his meaning came through—I'd better not talk about this to people; they might "draw the wrong conclusions."

I understood the implied threat, too—everybody would overlook my craziness this once, but if I wanted to stay out of an institution, I'd better not make any more trouble. I'd better pretend the noises came from squirrels.

Next day I heard bumping and shoving overhead.

It scared me nearly to death. Something alive was there in my attic now, something dangerously strong, able to move trunks and wardrobes.

I knew I wasn't out of my head; I wasn't "hearing things"—I was as sane as those county men, and a good deal brighter. I knew, too, I hadn't lost my memory—and I hadn't swept that attic floor.

I stood there, trembling all over. But after Courtney's warning, I didn't dare call for help.

Yet I had to know what was going on.

It took me a while to get up courage—after all I'm an old

woman, and not so strong as I used to be.

Then I had an idea.

I went over to the cupboard where I keep what's left of my husband's wines. I don't drink myself—I was brought up to think it immodest conduct for a woman. But I do take a little of the Judge's port before bedtime, on Dr. Wheeler's recommendation.

That day I did something I've never done before. I drank some port in the daytime. After the second glass I could keep from shaking. After a couple more, I even felt equal to seeing what I'd find in the attic.

I opened the stair door and went up.

It took a minute for my eyes to get adjusted, and the heat shimmer blurred things a little.

Then I saw it.

My mother's big trunk—the heavy one. Always since we bought this house, it sat under the south dormer window. But now it was shoved into the northwest corner of the attic, its back with the big brass hinges turned toward me.

I screamed again, and must have fainted. At least, the next thing I knew Dr. Wheeler was standing over

me. I was lying in bed in my own room.

"You'll be all right now," he said. "But no more over-drinking. One glass of port is fine, but one's enough for you!"

He gestured toward my bedside table and I saw the empty bottle and the soiled glass. I had left them both in the kitchen, and I had left the bottle still half full, when I went to the attic.

"How did I get down here?" I asked.

"That little woman from downstairs—I think her name is Forster. She heard you scream, and came up to see what was the matter. She found you here in bed. You'd just had too much to drink, and passed out."

I said, "I was in the attic when I fainted."

"Then how did you get down? She found you here in bed."

"That's what I'd like to know," I told him, and began to shake so that I could hardly talk. "Th-they must have moved me."

"Who's they?"

"M-my s-squirrels." I laughed, from hysteria. I was shivering too much to speak clearly. I guess, too, I got pretty incoherent. But Dr. Wheeler finally went upstairs

and I could hear him walking around.

"The trunk you're talking about is that big one with the dome top and the brass hinges?" he asked when he came down again.

"Yes."

He shook his head. "You just can't carry that much liquor, Mrs. Lassiter." He grinned a little. "I've had experience myself with that port Judge Lassiter kept, and the amount you drank, the wonder is, you didn't see pink elephants—or green Martians."

I stared at him in horror.

"That trunk is under the south dormer, where you say you've always kept it."

I sat up in bed. "I'll have to see it!"

He didn't want me to go, but when I insisted, he went with me.

The trunk was under the south dormer, all right—nearly a foot and a half from where it always sat before.

I had hysterics. He had to carry me downstairs and give me a sedative.

After the medicine wore off, I lay there a long time, thinking. I wondered what the chances were that I really was crazy.

I got out of bed and put on my slippers. I went to the

stair door. I had my hand on the knob.

Then I remembered the horrible pictures in exposés of insane asylums. I thought of the keepsakes I had collected in my lifetime—things that are almost part of myself, but that they'd never let me take with me to an institution—my mother's silver teaset . . . the tinkling Swiss music box my husband gave me once for my birthday . . . the clock with the carved figures of the hours he bought me in Florence on our honeymoon . . . the bookends made from my oldest son's baby shoes.

If I just stayed out of the attic, if I just pretended that squirrels could sweep floors and move trunks, I could keep all these, and my freedom to live pretty much as I liked. Whoever was in the attic might slit my throat some night, but I hadn't too much longer to live anyway. I started to turn away from the door.

But it drew me, just as the boy she wants draws a young girl, so that she finds herself drifting toward him even while she works hard at staying away from him. I opened the door.

I climbed the steps slowly, age and caution holding me

back, and that fascinated curiosity drawing me on.

The heat shimmers still danced in the cool attic. The high-pitched whine still hovered just beyond my hearing.

Then a little voice whispered, "Why waste the power? She's quite harmless, now."

There must have been a dozen of them.

I said, "Why, you're fairies!" and indeed they stood about a foot tall, with lovely shimmering wings, and the golden antennae that the fairy princess always wore above her crown in the picture books of my childhood.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," whispered the same voice, and a susurrus of muted laughter rustled through the group—a laughter indescribably malign. "Some of our scouts were the Little People of your legends. That was before we perfected the selective light control."

I began to understand. "Then, that's why . . ."

"Yes, that's why your clumping friends couldn't see us. If you are foolish enough to bring anyone else here, they, too, will see nothing unusual." His sibilant whispering made unreasonable shivers along my backbone.

Then I noticed the slick

surface of his body—not clothing, as I had supposed, because the colors were so varied and so bright. A sort of shell—like beetles have, or lobsters. I thought of the lecturer I heard two years ago, the mystic who told us that insect-type beings like these manned the flying saucers. He told us how kindly they were, how wise and gentle and good.

I pushed down my fear—choked it back.

"Or Martians?" I asked.

The little creature shrugged.

"Who will believe you, Mrs. Lassiter? We choose our headquarters with some care—elderly, lonely women like yourself—"

I clung to the stair rail for support. I could not control my rising terror. That lecturer—he must never have seen their faces!

The little creature made a grimace like a cruel smile. "Our preparations are nearly complete now. But your type of cattle stampede so easily, Mrs. Lassiter." I saw his little two-pronged tongue run quickly along each side of his mouth in an unmistakable gesture—he was licking his lips. "We want no premature slaughter," he said, "no unnecessary waste of good meat."

THE END



PI in the sky

BY PHILIP WECK

These two were really for the birds. They'd missed their destination by a mere two thousand miles and it didn't bother them a bit. They had no money because they didn't know they'd need it. But they sure went for chocolate cream pie in a great big way!

"PIE," the young stranger said. "Chocolate cream."

We got apple, peach and cherry. If you want them fancy kinds you have to go across the street to the hotel. I told him so.

He kind of sighed. "Eighteen months," he said, "I been waiting for chocolate cream pie. Eighteen months."

Account of the outfit he had on, I figured he might be an ex-soldier. It was bits of a

uniform, all faded from the sun and wrinkled like he'd worn it out in the rain. He was a young feller, even with that gray hair, and he had a deep, dark tan, darker than the summer people get around here.

Old Know-It-All Doc Watson was next to him, perched on a stool, like he is every morning acting like he owned the joint. He said, "Why don't you go to the hotel?"

"Over there?" The young feller jerked his head toward the window. "With them women waitresses?"

"I never seen a man waitress yet," I told him.

But he didn't laugh. He had a scared look in his eyes, like maybe he was afraid of women. Kind of a wild, scared look.

"Gimme peach," he said.

"The trouble with you young folks nowadays," Doc Watson said, "is—"

I hiked down the counter to the pie tray at the other end and I didn't hear what was the trouble with young folks nowadays. Anyhow, I'd heard it before. Old Know-It-All Doc. He isn't even a doctor; he runs the only drug store in town and in the off season when the summer people are not here he spends all morning in my diner slopping up

coffee. And he knows everything. Just everything.

Some day I'm going to prove to the old coot that he's wrong about just one thing and maybe then he'll shut up.

I brought back the peach pie.

"I'm not afraid of women," the young feller was saying. "It's just, well—" Then he grinned, a sad little grin. "It's sure nice to talk to somebody again," he said. "Strangers, I mean."

That was a funny thing to say. And he still had that wild look in his eyes. I put the peach pie on the counter in front of him.

"Ala mode," he told me. So I had to go all the way back to the freezer and dump a slab of ice cream on it.

By the time I'd returned Doc was up to the "when I was a boy" part.

"When I was a boy," he said, "we weren't afraid of anything. No, sir. We weren't afraid of a thing."

I slapped down the peach pie ala mode with a bang. "Yeah, sure," I said. "Because when you was a boy things were different. You didn't have nothing to be afraid of. But times have changed."

"Is that so?" Doc spluttered. "Why, you young whip-

per-snapper, I'll have you know—"

"Coffee," the stranger said. "Black."

So I poured him a cup.

"Why, if you'd ever seen what I seen last night," I said, "you'd still be running."

"Ha!" Doc cried. "Ha! A flying saucer!"

"So I suppose I didn't see it. I suppose it didn't come down in the ocean about a mile off shore. I suppose we and all those others who saw it are nuts, huh?"

"Sugar," said the stranger.

I got him some sugar.

Doc had that look in his eyes, the kind he gets when he's thought up a new argument.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked.

That one stumped me. What was I going to do about it? Swim out there and dig it up, maybe, and—

"That's just the trouble with you people today," Doc said. "You don't do a thing. You sit back and talk about flying saucers for four, five years and you don't do a thing about them. Why, do you know what?"

I said, "Yeah, I know."

But he told me anyway. "If old Charlie Edison or Luther Burbank or Kettering or one of them was running things,

we'd have flying saucers of our own now, that's what. We'd have one of them satellite things floating around the earth. Why, we'd even have a weather station on the moon."

"Yeah, sure," I told him. "Sure. Only you're wrong, Doc. You're all wrong."

"I'm never wrong!" he snapped.

I just glared at him and the stranger dropped the spoon out of his coffee cup. It fell to the floor with a clatter.

He had the stupidest grin on his face I'd ever seen. "Well, what do you know!" he said. He picked it up and let it fall again. "Look!"

I got him another spoon. Somehow I felt kind of uncomfortable and I saw Doc Watson scoot away from him a bit.

The old coot. If I could only prove he was wrong, just once.

Then the stranger spoke up. "Mac, how far is Tempe?"

"How far is what?" I asked him.

"Tempe. The Hell-hole of the country. The garden spot of the desert. Tempe, Arizona."

Well, maybe he just wanted to know. "This here is North Jersey, Bud," I said. "The Garden State. Arizona's out

that way about a couple thousand miles."

"Twenty-two hundred," Doc said.

"Thanks," the stranger said. That was all. Just, "Thanks."

"That's a nice tan you got, Buddy," I told him. "From the Arizona sun?"

At first I figured he didn't get me. Then he shook his head. "I haven't been in Arizona for eighteen months."

"Florida?"

"Florida?" He shook his head again. "No, this is a sun lamp. You can't go out in the sun without any atmosphere, Mac. It would kill you."

Atmosphere? The guy was nuts.

But you know, nuts or not, he didn't bother me the way Doc did. The old fat-head.

"Doc," I said, "how do you know? Maybe we're doing it right now. Maybe we got a whole colony up there on the moon."

"Ha!" Doc cried. "Ha!"

"They sure ain't going to take photographers and reporters along," I went on. "They don't want them Russians to know about it. How many people knew about the atom bomb before we dropped it?"

"Ha!"

The stranger finished his pie and coffee and he got up. Then he sat down again, with a foolish grin on his phizz.

"Mac," he said.

I figured I knew what was coming.

"Look," he said, "I forgot something."

I said, "Yeah?"

"Yeah." He laughed and his laugh was just as bug-house as the look in his eyes. "I sure enough forgot it."

"So you're broke."

He got kind of flustered. You can tell the honest ones; they get flustered. The professionals put on an act and it shows through. Maybe this fellow had flipped his lid, sure, but he looked honest.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Give me your name and address and I'll send it to you."

"I guess I won't starve."

"No, I want to pay," he said. "It's just I forgot about money. I forgot you need it."

Sure, sure. Anyway I pointed to the sign in the window. "There's the name. It's thirty-five cents."

When I moved back to Doc, the stranger was scribbling on a paper napkin.

"How do you know, Doc?" I asked. "Maybe we have."

He said, "It's absolutely fantastic, that's how I know. It's preposterous. Why, we're

a hundred years away from reaching the moon."

At the door the stranger yelled, "I'll mail it to you, Mac." Then he went out.

"That's the trouble with Washington these days," Doc said.

Five minutes later he was still yapping about Washington when the stranger came back in. A little feller was with him, a man around fifty or so with an iron-gray mustache and the same deep tan the first one had. This new guy was wearing a blue suit that looked like a bus driver's only it was wrinkled, too, like he'd gone swimming in it, almost.

"Mac," said the first one, "I'm here again. How much was that bill?"

"Thirty-five cents."

"Pay him, Colonel," the first one said.

The little feller put a quarter and two nickels on the counter.

"And a dime for a tip," the first one said. "The way you play cards you can afford a dime tip."

A dime went on the counter.

"Now, Mac," said the first one, "tell the Colonel here where we are."

You meet some queer ducks, all right. "North Jersey," I

said. "About two thousand miles from Arizona."

The little guy said, "That's only an error of one thousandth of one percent. You have a differential of two thousand miles and a lag of two hundred and thirty-eight thousand. Figure it out yourself."

"Yeah and if you made it two thousandths of one percent," the other joker told him, "where would we be? Still out there someplace wandering around."

"It was the wind," the little one went on. "When we approached normal atmospheric density the wind velocity must have been more than we anticipated."

They headed for the door and I went back to Doc.

"Some day," Doc said, "Washington will spend the money where it should be spent and we'll have a station on the moon."

"Maybe we have got one, Doc," I said.

From the door the first one yelled, "You tell 'im, Mac; you tell 'im.'"

Then they left.

"Lunatics," Doc said. "Stark, raving mad. They've probably been in some institution, that's what."

And for once I agreed with him.

THE END

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POISON PLANET

BY SAM MERWIN, JR.

This is the world of tomorrow; a strange world indeed. Where space travel is an accomplished fact, but where a metal collar button is a rare treasure. Where the model of a twentieth-century railroad is worth more than the most modern rocket ship. Where men have conquered unnumbered solar systems, but still have not mastered their own greed nor learned the secret of love and compassion.

MARC THAW was in the process of drawing a grotesquely exaggerated figure of a nude woman on the scratch-pad in front of him when a sharp nervous elbow nudge to the ribs brought him abruptly out of his amiable abstraction.

Itchy Kawanato, who sat beside him on the vegfoam

cushions of the defendant's bench, was peering at him like a nervous ape. One of the few humans left who still had to wear spectacles, Itchy looked like a cross between a mange-stricken mandril and a moron.

Marc had to repress sternly a shudder of distaste at the proximity of this gar-



goyle, had to remind himself that Itchy was the scientific prop upon which the industrial empire of Renzo Nelson might well depend. He said, "Take it easy, Itchy—you aren't going to jail."

"Where's Judge Robinson?" Itchy asked in a loud whisper.

Marc looked around the courtroom in mild surprise. He saw that the prosecutor was wearing a grin on his hatchet face as if someone had given him an unexpected bonus. He glanced at the Justice on the bench, who sat alert and wary, his gavel poised for striking. He noted that George Booker Washington Carver, the defense attorney, was showing a lot of eyeball as he peered pleadingly in Marc's direction.

Marc permitted himself a reassuring half-smile, ripped the nude from the scratchpad and scribbled on the sheet beneath it, *Ask for a recess until the Judge gets here*, passed the note to a page boy. Then, painstakingly, he set out to draw another and more grotesque nude.

He didn't get far. Before he had time to relapse into his usual courtroom reverie completely, the rap of the Justice's gavel, coupled with the sound of his high dry in-

cisive voice, brought him out of it as effectively as had Itchy's elbow.

"Recess denied—continuance denied," intoned the prelate with a certain smugness that revealed his pleasure at foiling the defense.

Marc, who was present only as a consultant for the defense, had advised against letting the case appear before this particular justice, whose animosity toward Renzo Nelson and all his interests was well and widely known. But Renzo had been in a hurry to get the matter cleared up and, in preparation, the case had looked like an acquittal.

It was the missing Judge Robinson himself who had advised Marc, during his law school days, always to take advantage of all possible factors in favor of his client before allowing a case to come to trial. And now the retired solon, whose punctuality had been famed for decades in legal circles, was failing to appear in behalf of a witness who was also a neighbor and acquaintance, even a friend.

"Where can he be?" Itchy queried, his ugly face a mask of worry. "He promised he'd be here. Something must have happened."

"We'd know if anything

had happened to him, Itchy," Marc said soothingly. "And his promise is as good as uranium."

"I don't understand," muttered the scientist, shaking his head. His face had assumed the mournful fatalism of a Japanese bloodhound.

"Cheer up," Marc told him. "You're not going to jail, Itchy."

Absurd as it was, the charge against Itchy was a serious one. A month earlier someone had broken into the North American Transportation Museum in Park Pontchartrain and got away with one of its most valuable properties—a complete and perfect working model of a twentieth-century electric train, tracks, transformer and all.

In the late twenty-third century, when the discovery of a paper of rusty bobby pins or an ancient metal collar stud was worth more than its weight in thousand-credit notes, the theft of fifteen-odd pounds of steel and aluminum amounted to a major crime—entirely apart from the historical and educational value of the object stolen.

The appalling demands of space travel had virtually stripped the world of metal,

as it had stripped the neighboring planets and, with continued expansion, the planets of alien stars. Man had at last built the machines to carry him to the lip of the galaxy—but their price had been virtual elimination of metal from his daily life. He now lived in a world of vegetable, plastic and silicon products.

Hence the hue-and-cry over theft of the model train—and the howl of well-stirred popular and legal indignation that had arisen when the stolen goods had been found two days later in Itchy Kanawato's Sand Mountain, Missouri, home and laboratory. An anonymous tip had put Government agents, moving out of St. Louis, on the trail.

Itchy was innocent—Marc was sure of that. In the first place, the astigmatic scientist lacked the nerve to commit any conscious crime. In the second place, Itchy was incapable of stupidity as accused in failing to hide the evidence should he ever muster nerve to commit such a crime. In the third place, the Nisei descendant was working in plastics rather than steel. And in the fourth place, he had—or had had—an iron-clad alibi.

The whole affair was the rankest sort of a frame-up.

But the public thought otherwise—and Marc had to grant them grounds for being suspicious of Renzo Nelson's sprawling industrial and promotional empire. Its less savory aspects, however, were well barricaded by bribery and subversive legislation against investigation. And where mere money failed there were other methods.

Nelson's empire was built upon complete control of the machines that created the synthejewels that had, almost a century before, rendered Kimberly and the emerald mines of Brazil as dead as any ghost town of the old Wild West in America. These vast machines, that created just about all the ornaments worn by men and women upon all the civilized and semi-civilized worlds, brought Renzo Nelson in an income of about thirteen billion credits a year. They were the multiple keystone upon which all his enterprises were reared.

And they were beginning to wear out after a century of unremitting overuse. All of their parts that could be replaced with glass or plastics had long since been thus replaced. But their essential parts were metal—hard steel-

titanium alloys—and thus far not even Renzo Nelson had been able to wheedle a grant out of the GTL.

It was this problem that Itchy Kawanato was expending his undoubted genius on. Retired Judge Robinson's Sand Mountain neighbor had won a planet-wide reputation as a latter-day Luther Burbank when the increasingly worried Renzo Nelson hired him to produce, through tree-grafting, a plastic that would replace the failing metal parts of his synthejem machines.

Shy, intuitive, intensely hard-working and patient, Itchy had spent the evening with his neighbor, Judge Robinson, who lived a half mile on the other side of Sand Mountain. He had walked, preferring the exercise to the easier use of his aerocar. About eleven o'clock, after two hours of quiet chatting, Itchy had walked home. On the way he had stopped to exchange a few words with Hobe Connors, a local handyman who occasionally helped Itchy with his plantings.

So the case had looked like an easy acquittal—but Judge Robinson had failed to show up for the trial. Marc found himself beginning to worry.

His employer had already shown concern out of all proportion to the importance of the charges. Granted that the whole affair was a clumsy frame-up, the billionaire wanted to know which of his many enemies was after him. Which was, Marc had told him, a rough question, simply because there were so many men who hated him.

"You can count me among them, Renzo," Marc had added. "After all, you ruined my father."

"I know you hate me," had been the billionaire's reply, "but you're too damned smart to kill the goose with the uranium eggs."

Marc had sighed and said, "I fear you're so right. Has it occurred to you that maybe this frame-up of Itchy isn't so stupid—or that its very stupidity is its strength?"

"How do you mean—how do you mean?" Renzo had snapped, scowling.

"Think it over, Renzo," Marc had said calmly. "It's getting you all hotted up about who's behind it? It's taking your mind off a lot of other things you should be thinking about, maybe that's the idea—maybe whoever is behind it is really striking somewhere else."

Renzo said, "Very well, Marc, I want you to cover the trial. Make sure nothing goes wrong. Then I shall be free to concentrate, as you suggest, on my other interests."

Marc tried to tell himself that nothing would happen—that Hobe Connors would provide Itchy with the needed alibi—but inside himself he didn't believe it.

George Booker Washington Carver had Connors on the stand. The dark-skinned defense attorney questioned him quietly, skilfully. Connors' story was simple and straightforward. Yes, he had seen Mr. Kawanato on the night in question. He himself had been making sure that the drizzle that had been falling had not upset the delicate nutrient balance of some of Mr. Kawanato's trees.

Yes, they had stopped for a brief talk on the road. Yes, they had discussed the effect of the light rain on the nutrient tanks. No, they had not discussed anything else. It was as simple as that.

The States attorney, masking his disappointment behind the hatchet of his face, did not even bother to cross-examine. Marc heaved a silent sigh of relief when George Booker Washington Carver called his client to the

stand as final witness in his own behalf.

Itchy's testimony bore out that of Hobe Connors and backed up the preliminary statements given earlier by the defense attorney. Yes, he had not left Sand Mountain on the evening in question. Yes, he had visited Judge Robinson. Yes, that was the same Judge Robinson who had for many years sat on the Circuit Court of Appeals. What had they talked about during their two-hour session? Oh, development of special growth for specific industrial use in plastics, with emphasis of developing a type of wood with ingrained silicon properties that might have the properties of high-test metal and the elasticity of glass when properly processed.

Marc frowned at this—it sounded dangerously close to revealing Nelson Corporation secrets. He eyed the jury speculatively to see how they were taking it.

"You say Judge Robinson also dabbles in controlled growth?"

"He does," came the reply. "That's why we both live on Sand Mountain. The silicon qualities of its soil are important to our experiments. The

Judge took me out and showed me his own orchard that evening. I tried to give him some pointers."

March frowned, his earlier presentiments returning. It seemed to him the defendant was wandering—or rather that the defense attorney was leading him—far astray from the main issue, which was whether or not he could have robbed the New Orleans museum on the night in question.

Acting on a hunch Marc pulled a visiphone close to him, obtained Judge Robinson's number and whispered it into the mouthpiece. All he got was silence and a *Repondit pas* on the screen in international visicode. The Judge was evidently not at home.

"Tell me, Mr. Kawanato," said the prosecutor, "does Judge Robinson have his orchard illuminated?"

"Why, no—I don't believe so," replied the scientist, puzzled.

"Then perhaps you used neotorches when you examined the trees?"

"I don't re—no, I'm sure we didn't," said Itchy, frowning.

"Then tell me how in the name of heaven you could see anything? Remember, it was

a dark and rainy night according to Mr. Connors, yourself and the local weather bureau records."

The scientist ran a nervous pallid tongue-tip over his lower lip. Then his face brightened and he said, "But we didn't need any light to see. The weather cleared for a little while and there was a full moon."

For an instant the prosecutor was non-plussed. Then, returning to the attack, he said, "You say there was a full moon for awhile on the evening in question. Perhaps you'll describe it to the court."

Itchy stirred restlessly, living up to his nickname, scratched a skinny bare thigh, then said, "I remember it did look funny. It had a distinct blue tinge. I even remarked about it to Judge Robinson."

"And what was the comment, if any, of the Judge?"

"The Judge remarked that it was one of the rare blue moons poets used to sing about."

It got a laugh, not only from the prosecutor but from the jury and the courtroom at large.

At that moment the prosecutor asked for a brief recess

to obtain an almanac and meteorological records for the night in question. It was granted but Marc waited to hear no more. Memory had recalled a semi-legend known to all American law students—of how young Abraham Lincoln had destroyed a witness' alibi in a murder case by use of a primitive *Farmer's Almanac*, which proved there was no moon on the night the defendant claimed to have seen a witness elsewhere.

He was halfway up the aisle when George Booker Washington Carver caught up with him. The defense attorney's blue-black skin was beaded with sweat although the room was normally air-conditioned. He said, "Mr. Thaw, what are we going to do? We've got Mr. Kawanato in a jam."

"You got him in a jam," snapped Marc angrily. "You failed to come up with your key witness and then opened the way for that damned prosecutor by letting Itchy ramble. You got me in a jam when you fouled it up. As far as I'm concerned everything's already done."

Marc rested on his elbow and looked across the sapphire-blue glass tabletop at

Odessa Dulac. They were alone together in an *oval à deux* of the Cafe Dominique on New Bourbon Street—almost as secluded as a bedroom, yet as public as the broad avenue outside.

Marc sipped his own Ramos fizz and let his eyes regard lingeringly the long slow curves of Odessa's magnificent figure, fashionably revealed by her thigh-length singlet of pure white linen, its neckline open to the dark-gold belt that was its single ornament. Her eyes caught his and her full lips curved in a soft smile of appreciation. She said in the soft husky voice that was the spur and despair of half the eligible males of New Orleans, "No, Marc darling—"

"Why not?" he countered. "I'm rich enough now. I may even be clever enough. I've loved you for five years. What else do you want?"

"Al! very true," she said with the suggestion of a sigh. "You offer very fine husband material. But, darling, I've *been* married and it was a very distressing experience. I'm not anxious to repeat."

"Just because Coburn was after your money . . ." he told her.

". . . I'm not to swear off

marriage for life?" she concluded for him. "Darling, that's not it at all and you know it. Perhaps you can answer this question—why *should* I marry again? I have a full and fascinating life right now—with the added blessing of freedom."

Marc uttered an ancient four-letter word. He said, "You didn't act that way five years ago at Como-Mars."

Briefly she lowered her eyes. "That was five years ago, Marc. I was frightened and there were just the two of us and the circumstances were—well, romantic."

"It took both of us," he told her. "Why did you kill it?"

"I didn't kill it," she replied quietly. "Circumstances stepped in and killed it for us. I don't believe either of us was hurt—quite the contrary. I'm a woman and no woman is ever truly happy without an occasional lapse into pure romance."

"So now I'm a lapse," he said, resentment uncoiling within him.

She laughed softly and said, "You know that isn't true. Have I ever been unkind to you—truly unkind—since?"

"You're being damnably unkind to me right now," he

replied. "Why do you think I've worked so hard to make myself rich?"

"So I'm the reward you get for running Renzo's errands," she mused. "Darling, I'm afraid I'm much too much of an egotist to accept that. *You* may believe I'm the reason but *I* don't. You had to get rich at Renzo's expense, Marc—if only to compensate for his ruining your father."

"You like Renzo," he flung at her accusingly.

"He—interests me," she replied thoughtfully. "All that drive and ambition and ruthlessness locked up inside that choir-boy shell. Darling, Renzo interests *you*—if he didn't you'd have stayed poor."

Marc shrugged. She was right, of course. But she was underrating, possibly for some purpose of her own, his very genuine love for her. He said, "None of which is a reason for not marrying me."

She looked at him a long time, unsmiling, serious. Then she said softly, "Perhaps my real reason is not very pleasing to me." Then, with a quick physical readjustment that brought her more nearly to an upright sitting position, "Darling, you're thirty-three . . ."

"Thirty-four," he corrected, dreading what was coming.

"Thirty-four then — it makes little difference," she went on. "You must know I'm almost ten years older."

"What difference does that make?" he asked her. "Surely, in this day and age, when we all live so much longer . . ."

"Not enough longer," she told him. "She studied him as frankly as he had studied her, moments before. "We might have ten years together, even twenty. Then I'd be old while you'd just be reaching your prime. No, darling, if I marry again I want no such handicap."

"You'd sacrifice twenty years for that?"

She nodded, said, "Certainly, darling. Think of the other end of it—the far-off end. I'd be wrinkled and ugly—or all starched up trying not to be wrinkled and ugly"—she dismissed his attempt to interrupt with the flick of a strong slender wrist—"and you'd be at the very peak of your not inconsiderable fascination. I don't think I could bear the thought of other women. It's difficult even now."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

She said, "I know about

your little red-headed doctor. I don't blame you—I have no right to since I refuse to exert any claim on you. Though I do hope you'll be careful. But that's not the point. The point is that inevitably you would be drawn to others—and I have no intention of submitting myself to that again."

"Odessa," said Marc, "you're a coward."

She gave him an indolent quarter-smile and told him, "I hope so, Marc—I certainly hope so. Only a fool is anything else."

There seemed nothing more to say, so he said it. The sudden clearing of a throat in the aisle just outside the booth caused them both to look quickly up at the tilted mirror before them.

Manuel Kin stood outside, his slight wiry frame grotesquely distorted by the flaring and padded bolo shirt and virishorts that covered its middle sections. His thumbs were hooked in the beltless loops at his waist and his expression was a seraphic leer.

He said, in tone that belied his words, "I hope I'm not intruding on anything, dear hearts." His tone was a strange parody of the surviv-

ing anachronism of Oxonian speech.

"Nothing that a wee spot of murder won't cure," said Marc, regarding his colleague in the service of Renzo Nelson with loathing.

Manuel Kin laughed silently, relishing Marc's dislike. He said, "Good evening, Odessa. You look more beautiful than ever."

"May I say the same of you, Manuel?" she countered, smiling.

Manuel grinned back, well aware of his ugliness. Marc felt bitter jealousy come to a boil within him at the thought of these two sharing any sort of relationship together, even the most casual. Or was it casual?

Manuel said, not moving, "Marc, the governor wants to see you. Old boy seems to be in a bit of a swivet. Hope it's nothing serious."

"You hope nothing of the sort," replied Marc evenly. "What's more, you know why he wants me just as well as I do."

Odessa had the grace to look concerned. She said, "Marc—is something wrong?"

Without removing his thumbs from the beltless loops at his waist Manuel said through a grin of sheer

malice, "Nothin' our friend here shouldn't be able to explain away. Gifted sort of chap, wot?"

"Something is wrong," Odessa stated. "Marc, what is it?"

"I wish I knew," Marc told her frankly. "I'm exactly as anxious to find out what it is as Renzo is. You tell him that, Manuel—and tell him I'm going to find out pronto."

"You tell him, old boy," said Manuel through his grin.

"Did Renzo send you here to find me?" Marc asked unhappily.

Manuel nodded, said, "Also to make sure Odessa is escorted home without harm. Hope you don't mind too much, old boy?"

Marc hesitated and Odessa laid a hand again on his arm. She said, her voice low, "Perhaps you'd better go, Marc."

He got slowly to his feet, leaned across the table to give the anxious Odessa a formal buss of farewell. He said, "Don't let this disciple of Kali garrote you when he gets you to your apartment."

"Has anybody here seen Kali?" Manuel gibed.

Marc restrained an impulse to give the intruder a shove as he slipped past him from the oval, blinking in the sud-

den brightness of the restaurant aisle lights. Manuel Kin was one of the four most dangerous men on any of the six hundred and forty-two inhabited planets. He had no idea who the other three were, nor did he wish to know—but he felt reasonably certain that the estimate was correct. He was glad to get away from Manuel, even though it meant leaving Odessa with him. Odessa, he had good reason to know, could take care of herself under any circumstances.

Renzo Nelson was reclining on a couch-chair in the Martian corner of his 60-foot "small" living room when Marc entered.

The billionaire's home was deep underground—a costly aftermath of the atomic wars of two centuries earlier. Its three stories of rooms and offices and kitchens sprawled over an area a couple of acres in extent, a quarter mile beneath the sunbaked streets and boulevards of the capital.

As Marc crossed the carpet of soft and rare Venerian desertmoss, his employer switched off the vidar-screen he had been watching and lifted a hand in greeting. At his elbow was a beaker of zephyrlight Centaurian cham-

pagne. He said, "Sit down, doll."

Marc plopped himself onto a couch-chair facing his employer. Odessa's simile about Renzo's choir-boy exterior had, he thought, been an apt one. The billionaire, gently plump and gently tanned, did look like a choir-boy—albeit a choir-boy slightly overage and slightly, ever so slightly, disillusioned with the world about him.

His large limpid eyes looked at Marc sadly and he did not offer his trouble-shooter a drink—which might possibly be significant. He said, "Marc, tell me—tell me what went wrong."

Marc said, "I can tell you the surface facts—but I don't believe them and you won't either."

The billionaire stirred in a faintly restless gesture. He said, "Tell me anyway. I want your impression—your own impression."

Marc told him. For a long moment Renzo Nelson weighed Marc's words. Then he said, "Tell me, Marc—tell me. Do you think Itchy's guilty?"

"Less than ever," Marc replied promptly. "If ever I saw an innocent man, Itchy is it. The whole thing's a frame-up."

"Agreed," said the billion-

aire. "Agreed, Marc. But to what end? I fail to see the purpose—the purpose behind it."

"Nor do I," Marc told him. "Frankly, I'm puzzled by two items. One is the missing witness, the other . . ." He went on to explain about Itchy and the mysterious blue moon.

Marc said, frowning slightly, "Under the circumstances perhaps there was nothing more you could do. It was up to Carver to have his witnesses present." He paused, added, "But tell me, doll—tell me what you plan to do about it?"

"I'm going to find out what's happened to Judge Robinson," replied Marc. "He was one of my law-school lecturers, you know—I think he was rather fond of me. Then I'm going to find out about that damned moon!"

"It's all very odd—very odd," mused the billionaire. Since there was no objection Marc knew that his plan of action had been tentatively approved. "A blue moon—I never heard of one."

"I believe," Marc told him, "that it was a rarity frequently referred to by the romantic songwriters of the early twentieth century.

They used to find the moon romantic, you know."

"Beastly place—beastly!" said Renzo with a shudder. He eyed Marc somberly for a moment, then said, "This affair—this whole strange affair—it's none of your doing, is it, Marc? I have never been able to forget you have cause to hate me."

"Has Manuel been stuffing your ears again?" Marc countered.

"Objectionable—an objectionable phrase," the billionaire said by way of admission.

Marc decided it was time for a positive step. He said, "No, I'm as baffled as you are, Renzo. I'm engaged in the highly mixed metaphorical business of milking a uranium goose rather than destroying it or seeking to destroy it. As a matter of fact, Odessa quite correctly informed me that without you I'd probably never be rich. For which I am properly grateful."

"You were never grateful—never grateful to anyone, properly or otherwise," his employer told him. He smiled faintly and added, "I'm glad you told me—Manuel reported he found you with Madam Duclos."

"If I hadn't felt sure of

that I'd never have mentioned it," Marc retorted. "Some-day, I fear, Manuel and I will have it out."

"I shall be interested—highly interested to observe the winner," Renzo told him. At that moment one of the billionaire's turbaned Hindu servants entered with a tray of gray-blue Antarean teak that supported a tall pitcher of Centaurian champagne and two beakers of etched crystal.

Marc looked enquiringly at the two glasses as the servant filled his own and Renzo said indulgently, "Donna will be dining with us this evening. She seems quite fond of you—quite fond indeed. You're a lucky fellow—a very lucky fellow."

Donna came breezing in a moment later, her copper curls agleam with dew-set and brief as the lime-green and silver tunic she wore.

She could not have been more than five-feet tall soaking wet—but her figure was slimly and provocatively ample in all the right places. Her milk-white forehead was smooth and untroubled, yet she had graduated from difficult Mayoclin Medical College not long before with absolute top honors.

Regarding her as she lifted a hand and said, "Hi, men!" with a smile that was sheer impudence, Marc was reminded of a ribald adage that had drifted down through the centuries and might have been tailored to fit her. It went, "Big girl, big time—little girl, all the time."

She pirouetted in front of the men, lifting her brief lime- and gold-skirt even higher, and said, "Isn't it a Boötean swan of a dress?" Then, as Renzo nodded and Marc murmured words of agreement, she pouted at the billionaire and said, "Sweet, you might have put on something beside that ancient rag for Marc."

Renzo was not at all put out. No one he paid could ever embarrass him. He shrugged enigmatically and said, "But Donna I wasn't sure—wasn't sure at all that Marc could stay."

"Well, I'm glad he could!" the girl exclaimed. "Marc, we haven't seen you in ages!" Then, noting the tray with its pitcher and glasses, "Champagne — Centaurian champagne! How festive!"

"Marc's been rather busy," the billionaire said drily while the subject of his remark filled the glass of his comely physician.

Donna took a healthy sip from her drink, wrinkled her short nose in pleasure, then said, scolding, "Renzo, my sweet, I think you work Marc much too hard. He looks tired."

"Perhaps he's had a trying day," said Renzo Nelson, refilling his own glass.

Donna regarded him with doubtful speculation and said, "I know that's not your second, sweet. You shouldn't—well, I don't suppose *one* more will hurt you. You don't want to get toxic, sweet."

"My!" Renzo exclaimed mildly. "You do take good care of me, don't you, Donna?"

"If I didn't," the girl retorted, "I'd be out of a job."

"Don't worry—don't worry at all," said the billionaire, taking a brief pull on his drink with faint defiance. "If I should—should cease to be, I've left you well provided for."

"That," said Donna, bending to plant a kiss on his temple and revealing considerable satin-soft bosom in so doing, "is exactly why I want to take care of you. Some of your provisions . . ."

The shadow of fear of death left the billionaire's strangely young-old face. He

slipped an arm around his physician's slim waist and pulled her down onto the edge of his couch chair. Donna laughingly permitted his caress, flashing one light-quick grimace of utter impudence at Marc as she did so.

Marc permitted her to carry the conversational ball, sipping his drink and pondering the fact that the more daring a ruthless materialist like Renzo, the greater his terror of dying.

Was it, he wondered, because they actually believed in some sort of punishment after death for their sins on Earth? It seemed incredible, though at bottom, he supposed, a sort of dreadful naïveté must underly the subtlest of self-centered souls.

Or did their fear of extinction stem from the fact that, having sacrificed whatever consciences they possessed to attain their positions of power, they could not endure the thought of ceasing to enjoy the fruits of their victorious war on their fellows? Probably, he decided, it was a blend of the two fears.

Dinner was announced by a turbaned Sikh, who rolled in the individual wheeled tabourets with solemn gravity, placing two in front of

the couch-chair Donna shared with Renzo, one in front of Marc. He removed the plastic plate covers, revealing a magnificent curry of beef, banked with brilliantly colored extra-terrestrial vegetables and spices, with seasonings from the stars.

He noticed that Renzo ate sparingly, watchful as usual not only of his trim waistline but of the lining of his stomach. Donna fork-fed him much of the time, teasingly withdrawing the fork, which caused Renzo to snap after it like a hungry wolf.

When they had finished she poured a powder into an extra tumbler on his tray. "Take your medicine like a good boy," she told him.

He made a face but he took it, then lay back and sighed with content, fondling Donna the while. He made no move to stop fondling her when the servant returned to wheel out the trays but afforded Marc a mirthless smile and said, "I don't know what I'd do without my little doctor—I suspect I'd grow old overnight."

"Not you—never!" she exclaimed, bending to kiss him.

"Mmmm! But your patient isn't the man he used to be," Renzo said, shaking his head and yawning. "He's getting mighty sleepy."

"Maybe he'd better rest for a little while," said Donna, patting his cheek as if he were a baby. "Does he want Donna to tuck him in for a short nap?"

He nodded, too tired to talk, sat up slowly and got to his feet. Marc rose and said, "I'll run along then, Renzo. Thanks for the dinner—and the wine. They were both perfect."

"Perhaps you'd better," Renzo told him with thick tongue. "I did want—want to talk to you. But I guess you know—know what I want you to do. Let me know what happens, doll."

Marc moved slowly toward the door to the hall where the lift waited, 60 feet away, as the billionaire, his arm around Donna's trim tiny waist, moved heavily the other way toward his bedroom. But a flash of the girl's gray eyes, over her shoulder, told him to stay. There were reasons why he could not afford to have Donna MacLean angry at him—not according to the pattern in which his instincts told him affairs were shaping up directly ahead of him. It was not a pleasing pattern.

Within a very few moments Donna beckoned him from the doorway through

which she had so recently disappeared with their mutual employer. She had removed her brief tunic and wore only the utterly provocative body which, with her impudence, shrewdness and complete lack of any self-repression, constituted her chief weapon in life.

When he reached her, she flung herself upon him, pulled his lips down and devoured them with her own before he could speak, pressed the soft protuberances of herself against him.

"Are you crazy?" he whispered, scowling and holding her off.

Her laughter was silent and utterly mad. She said, in an erratic whisper. "Don't be afraid, sweet. What do you think I put in the old fool's medicine?"

For the second time that day Marc uttered a four-letter word. "You damned little fool!" he snapped at her. "You've got Renzo—he pays for you. Why do you bother me?"

"Renzo!" she exclaimed scornfully. "Listen." For a moment she clung to him in silence and Marc could hear the steady rale of the billionaire's snores. "He's too old—besides, you didn't used to

think it was a bother." Again her eyes gleamed menace.

"I don't—it isn't," he said desperately. "But it's crazy and you know it. Sooner or later we're bound to get caught."

"You talk too much," said Donna, pushing him into her own bedroom, conveniently across a narrow corridor from Renzo Nelson's. There she took her insatiable will of him while his ears were unable to shut out the sound of the billionaire's snores.

When she was through at last she said, "Thanks, sweet. You were wonderful." She might have been describing a medication, which, come to think of it, she probably was, he decided.

"Donna," he told her, "I think you enjoy making a roach out of me. I warn you, I'm going to be awfully busy—and I'm going to be out of town for a long time."

She laughed up at him, her eyes slits of pleasure, and said, "You just think you are, sweet. When Donna wants you you'll be here."

"The devil I will," he said.

No one saw him out—but he was too wise in the ways of Renzo Nelson's domestic arrangements to hope that his time of departure had not been seen and noted on a

memo tape. The damned little fool!

Marc's New Orleans apartment was one of the lower penthouses in one of the comparatively new skyscrapers that rose, each in its landscaped park of planned isolation, west of the city proper.

He entered his apartment with a feeling of relief at having managed to get home at all—but this relief ceased abruptly when he discovered that the foyer and living room lights were on. Manuel Kin, uglier than ever, lay stretched out on a chair-couch with his bouffant shirt off, revealing a scarred and utterly hairless torso. The co-agent was looking at an obscene girl-show on one of the bootleg Venezuelan vidar channels, upon the screen that covered the far wall.

He said, "Greetings, chap—pie—you're rather tardy, wot?"

"Wot—I mean what the hell are you doing here?" Marc asked, wishing stirrings of fear weren't adding a slight quaver to his show of more or less honest indignation.

"Renzo told me to come here and wait for you when I got the pheasant home," he replied casually. "So I came

up here and waited. Careless of you to leave your door unlocked."

"Yes, wasn't it?" countered Marc drily. He distinctly recalled having locked the voice combination before leaving. He'd have given a lot to know how Manuel had managed to crack it but had no intention of giving his visitor the satisfaction of asking. Instead he said, "I hope you found something you liked to eat."

Manuel gestured expansively. "I ordered from the restaurant downstairs," he said. "You do yourself rather well up here, old man. But I'd rather live underground—it's more exclusive, don't you know?"

"Oh, dry up!" Marc said rudely. He had wanted the solace of a call to Odessa after a long cool vaposhower to wash Donna out of his pores, then the comfort of sleep. After the events of the eight hours past he needed some rest.

Another thought struck him. He turned back to his uninvited guest and said, "What are you waiting for here anyway?"

"You, chum," replied Manuel. "The governor asked me to come over here and wait till you got back. He

seemed to think you and I'd be dashing off somewhere pronto. Said it couldn't wait." He paused and added aggrievedly, "He might have told me you were staying for dinner."

"I don't think he expected it himself," said Marc, trying to compute the meanings, inner and outer, of this new development.

Manuel finished tucking in his shirt, tucked his thumbs into the beltless loops of his virishorts belt. He sniggered and said, "Chappie, if you could talk your way into a dinner invitation after the livid rage the Governor felt toward you this afternoon, I'm going to listen—and learn," said Manuel.

"Believe it or not, I did have a case," said Marc. "I doubt if even Renzo could have foreseen the factors that bolluxed things up for poor Itchy in court today."

"You must have fascinated him," said Manuel, running his hands rapidly over himself in a gesture Marc could only interpret as a check of the availability of hidden weapons. "Where are we going?"

"Sand Mountain," Marc told him. "We're going to find out what's happened to Judge Robinson and the blue moon."

"Come again?" asked Manuel, once again non-plussed.

Riding north through the night in an aerocar with Manuel, Marc stared out the curved window at the moon-swept landscape of river, town, low hills and bayous beneath—but his conscious mind recorded little of what he saw.

Instinct shouted that his days, perhaps his hours of usefulness to Renzo Nelson were about ended. Yet, though no longer trusted, he was being permitted to go ahead with his investigation.

There was, of course, one faint chance for him. Should he uncover, in the course of the present investigation, some startling new facts or factors that affected Renzo and his multiple enterprises, he might be able to turn them to his advantage and reestablish himself. Manuel's presence at his elbow, however, made the success of such a course highly problematical.

"Nice night for a ride, old man—wot?" Manuel remarked, his thin lips spreading in their peculiarly repellent smile.

Marc nodded. His thoughts reverted to death, then to their mutual employer's intense fear of extinction.

He said, "Manuel, are you afraid to die?"

The Eurasian's teeth gleamed in the moonlight. He said, "How do you think I've managed to stay alive this long, old man. If you're getting ideas, forget 'em, chappie. I have no intention of dying tonight." The idea seemed to amuse him.

"The question was figurative," said Marc. He explained that he was thinking about Renzo Nelson and his refusal to face the inevitable.

"Why should he want to face it?" countered the assassin. "He's got the deuce of a lot to live for, old man."

To Manuel it was as simple as that. Marc relapsed into silence and turned his thoughts to the object of their search. Judge Perry Robinson, the missing witness, was the most truly noble—perhaps the only truly noble—man he had yet met. Without closing his lids, Marc could see in his mind's eye the leonine head with its shock of blue-white hair, the grave intelligent kindly face that could light up so quickly with the delight of a child.

He wished—and not merely for the sake of his current problem—that he had taken the trouble to know the Judge better.

The Judge had preached the Georgic virtues of simple rural living, of modest toil and modest aims and modest government. "Someday," he had told Marc and a few other favorite disciples during an informal evening precept in his comfortable New Orleans home, "I should like to go there and live out the remainder of my days—when my work here, of course, is finished."

Marc recalled that he had replied, "Judge, you'd get there and within a couple of weeks or months or years you'd be so homesick for the life and excitement of New Orleans you'd take the first spaceship back."

The remark had won the laughter intended from the other students present—but Judge Robinson had merely smiled benignly and told them, "Thaw, you mustn't destroy the dream of any man—or woman. It's the surest way in the world to make yourself hated."

And Marc, embarrassed, had sensed the granite purpose behind the benignity. He wished he could remember now the name of Judge Robinson's favorite planet.

As Manuel pressed the buttons that brought the aerocar

in for a landing on Sand Mountain, Marc wondered not for the first time if some mishap had befallen his one-time mentor. And while his conscious mind informed him that such almost had to be the case, his deeper instincts remained calm, assuring him no harm had come to the Judge.

Manuel brought the aerocar to a joltless halt on the vegefabric landing plat in front of the low double domes of the Judge's home. "Well, here we are, old man—wot next?"

"Let's take a look inside," said Marc. "Can you crack it?"

"Easy," Manuel replied with scorn. But there was no need to tap locks. The front door, operated on the usual beam, opened at their approach. Lights went on and they found themselves standing in a semicircular hall that opened into a living room whose boundaries were the walls of the larger of the two domes.

The chamber, like the rest of the house, seemed odd, almost alien. It contained few of the aids to comfort to which Marc was accustomed. There were no couch-chairs and even the vidar screen was of the smallest size and

obviously intended merely for information and communication, rather than entertainment.

"What the deuce is this?" Marc turned to find his unwelcome companion staring at an odd tri-dimensional decoration that seemed to be the centerpiece around which the entire room was built.

It was an unusual, perhaps a unique, object. Rigged on almost invisible glass wires were a gigantic green-hued nacreous ball, perhaps six inches in diameter, and, a foot away, a smaller blue-tinted globe, perhaps an inch in diameter, of similar gleaming material. At various points about these two odd balls glistening lesser dots of simulated metal were ranged, also on wires.

"It's a strange looking mobile," said Marc, studying it. He poked the large globe gently with a forefinger and it swung about, causing the other gleaming ball and the lesser dots to move.

"Hold it, chappie," said Manuel suddenly. "I've spent a lot of time in space. Unless I'm daft, this is a tri-di model of Aries from somewhere inside."

"I'll be damned!" Marc exclaimed. Old Judge Robinson's ideal planet had been

part of the Aries system—its name was Lithia. Lithia, he now recalled, had a single moon. As the planet itself approximated the size of Earth, so Lithia's moon—the name was Cerberus—was close to the size of Earth's moon.

And it was distinctly blue in color!

For a moment Marc stared at the model stupidly. Here, he knew, had to be Itchy's inexplicable moon. Here had to be the explanation of the fallacious alibi as well as of the Judge's mysterious disappearance. And here, if he played his cards right, had to be his own stay of execution—or oblivion!

The implications were staggering. If what must have happened had actually happened the most important development in the history of man since his discovery of fire lay already within his grasp, had been mastered by some. Teleportation—the key to the universe!

"This mean something special to you?" Manuel's question was deceptively casual but intensity lay beneath it—as it lay in his now wide open and seemingly guileless gaze.

Marc's wits, which had been operating at quarter-speed since the courtroom fiasco,

were now on star-drive. He said, "Those globes—do you know what they are?"

"They look like synthepearls to me," Manuel said wonderingly.

"They're not synthepearls," Marc told him quietly. "They are real." He felt as if he had stepped out of quicksand onto solid ground. "The Judge used to talk about them. There's an outsize double-shelled lobster on Lithia that produces pearls like that between its inner and outer carapace."

"So . . . ?" The assassin remained unimpressed.

"Listen, my fine unfeathered unfriend," said Marc as if to a stupid child. "Don't you get the implications? Renzo's synthegem machines are falling apart for lack of metal replacements. Most people, if they found out about it, would think jewels were finished."

"That's the prospect, isn't it, chappie?" Manuel countered.

"Maybe—to us. Earth's jewels were pretty well thinned out before synthegem machines were invented. That's *why* they were invented—to meet a tremendous demand. Now they're wearing out. What's the answer—or can't you fathom it?"

Manuel's eyes had narrowed again. "You mean a group of certain other planets is planning to import real jewels when the machines break down?"

"It could be," said Marc, who believed nothing of the sort. "It would be extremely profitable—and it would mean ruin for Renzo and therefore for us. It could easily be exploited into a major trend."

"You're just possibly correct, old man. And perhaps Itchy was closer to a repair plastic than we thought—which would have ruined a real gem revival, right, chappie? So they stepped in and planted the train on him and prevented the Judge from clearing him. Right, old man?"

"As a trivet," said Marc. "As a trivet. It's even possible the Judge himself had a hand in it."

"Come on," said Manuel. "Let's take this thing and scamper back to Renzo, right?"

"Right again," said Marc. "You first, if you don't mind."

The return trip to New Orleans, through the faint yellow light of false dawn in the eastern sky, was far more

pleasant to Marc than the outward journey had been. The fatigue, the depression, the foul presentiments that had plagued him seemed to have vanished. He felt a return of the confidence that had carried him thus far on his career.

To check his jubilation before it stifled thought, Marc pressed on a reader-light and began to leaf through a volume he had lifted from the vanished Judge's shelves. Physically it was a beautiful book, hand-tooled with vege-gold leaf on fine cream-colored parchment. Its newness proved its alien origin, for the art of fine bookbinding had long since been lost on Earth.

But it was not the binding that interested him—there were scores of others as fine, perhaps finer, still resting on Judge Robinson's shelves. What had drawn him was the title—A HISTORY OF THE GREENITE FAITH AND ITS FOLLOWERS, FROM LACONIA, VERMONT, TO THE PLANET LITHIA.

The Greenites, of course, had been the odd nineteenth-century sect from which Judge Robinson claimed descent. Nudging Marc's memory was the fact that latter-day remnants of the perse-

cuted belief had welcomed a chance to settle on Lithia, an inhabitable planet whose lack of metal in usable forms had caused it to be bypassed during the great galactic expansion.

Deciding he lacked time and concentration to read its contents at the moment, he leafed back to the title page, then the flyleaf—and again felt a surge of excitement rise within him.

In his flowing distinctive unforgettable handwriting, the Judge had inscribed his signature. He had written—

*Perseus Green Robinson,
June 21, 2088, his book.*

True, the teacher of his law-school years had called himself Perry Robinson—but Perseus and Perry could be simple variations and the handwriting was unmistakably the same.

If Marc were right, and the inscribed date were right, the Judge must be at least two centuries old!

There was a saintly glow in the large limpid eyes of Renzo Nelson as he looked at Marc. Marc said, "Well, Renzo, there you have it—a possible real gem revival and almost certain mastery of tele-

portation by somebody somewhere."

"You have done extremely well, Marc. The extent of my gratitude will be evident the next time you check your bank account."

"Thanks, Renzo. But it was mostly bull luck!"

"I'm willing to pay—willing to pay for luck, doll. Now, what about these Brownites or whatever they are? What have you found out about them—?"

"Not a great deal in three days," replied the younger man. "But enough to make my theory seem to hold uranium."

"Go ahead—go ahead, I'm listening," said the billionaire.

Marc told him, "They were founded about four hundred fifty years ago by a New Hampshire Yankee named Perseus Green. You might call the basis of Greenism a sort of non-dialectic communism. All members of the community shared in its output, according to their contributions, up to and including each other."

"Free love?" the billionaire inquired with a gleam of interest.

"Yes—but strictly on a non-carnal plane. As in the primitive Mediterranean civi-

lizations paternity was generally unrecognized—all legal descent came through the mother. Apparently Perseus Green was something of a Messiah.

"Naturally, our Victorian forebears were outraged. They drove the Greenites from their midst much as they drove the Mormons—first to Western Kentucky, then to an arid stretch of Arizona. There is no record of any trouble between Greenites and the Indians of the time."

"What's important—what's important about that?" asked Renzo.

Marc shrugged, said, "I don't know—it's background. In spite of its communal mating the sect seems to have believed in being careful—at any rate its population never rose above five thousand. I've checked the figures in the census reports and some of them are interesting. The Greenites hit their peak population of about six thousand early in the twentieth century. And there it stayed until a few years after World War Two. Then it took a nose dive to about half that—the general intelligence level dropped too."

"That sounds—it sounds

like poor land afflicting poor people," said Renzo.

"I don't think so," Marc told him. "Somehow—probably by sheer hard work and brains—the Greenites made their patch of desert fertile. They irrigated, seeded, planted, harvested, even manufactured on a small scale in handicrafts and minor arts. Not once did they ask for or receive Federal Aid in the Roosevelt era."

He paused, then added, "In 2219, during the Aries sector expansion, the planet Lithia was discovered. Four years later, when the exploratory reports were in and the planet found wanting in any usable metals, the Greenites applied to the Galactic Transportation League for the right to emigrate and colonize the planet. They got it—chiefly because no one else wanted it.

"At that time the Greenite population in America was a little over two thousand. But three years later, when the migration took place, more than three thousand Greenites made the trip." Marc paused to let the effect of this fact sink in.

The billionaire was unimpressed. He said, "So—so what? They probably picked

up some emigration converts."

"The records don't show it," Marc told his employer. "But they do show that ten years after the migration—and, mind you, Renzo, no subsequent migrations took place—the population of Lithia was estimated by the GTL as being well upwards and beyond fifteen thousand."

Renzo Nelson sat up on his couch, frowning. Finally he said, "How do you interpret—interpret such an apparent discrepancy, doll?"

"In just one way," replied Marc. "Teleportation."

"Elucidate, Marc—elucidate further, please," said Renzo.

"Well," Marc told him, "Lithia is an ideal planet for Greenites. It lacks all mineral deposits that would tend to draw power or credit-hungry pirates. Yet, compared to their Arizona reservation, it offers the Greenites an agrarian Eden. If they have had teleportation, why shouldn't they have discovered Lithia years, perhaps centuries, before the GTL sent its ships out to Aries sector?"

"That might explain the population drop," remarked Renzo, frowning. "But if it

lies—if it does, why didn't they all go there?"

"Perhaps teleportation cannot be achieved by everyone," Marc suggested. "Note, only the less intelligent Greenites remained."

"Then why weren't they discovered by the GTL explorers?" the billionaire demanded.

"Probably because they hid," replied Marc. "I've worked it all out pretty thoroughly from the teleportation viewpoint. With it they would have kept in touch with progress here on Earth. They would have known when the GTL exploration was coming. Then, to make their subsequent migration look good they'd have sent some of their leaders back to Earth to help the others emigrate. That would explain why the population took a jump at the time the Greenites left Earth."

"It seems pretty far-fetched to me," said Renzo, giving the Aries model another poke. "Do you really think any group who had mastered teleportation would be able to keep it a secret for centuries? Think man! Such a talent would enrich the whole sect beyond want."

"The sect doesn't want riches as we know them,"

said Marc patiently. "That's one of the reasons the Greenites have always had trouble with society. And under some conditions I can see why a gift of teleportation would be kept secret. Suppose it involved some inner quality that couldn't be shared?"

"Doll," said Renzo firmly, "I think you've gone off your jets."

"Try to explain what's happened any other way," said Marc, angry. "I've already showed Itchy—poor devil—pictures of Cerberus—that's the blue moon of Lithia. He swears that's the moon he saw when Judge Robinson took him into the garden the night of the theft. Judge Robinson has vanished. No one has seen him for several weeks now. I'm convinced he teleported Itchy and himself to Lithia and back."

"For what purpose—for what purpose would he do that?" Renzo demanded, eyeing Marc with melancholy distrust.

"According to Itchy, he wanted some advice on raising trees with built-in plastic qualities," said Marc. "Renzo, on a planet with no usable metal, such development could be crucial. Furthermore, it seems to me that co-

incidence is asked to endure quite a lot when you consider that Judge Robinson and Itchy were the only two residents of Sand Mountain."

"You think—you think the Judge was watching Itchy for his own purposes then." It was a statement, not a question.

"I think it probable," Marc told him.

"Then tell me—tell me what you propose to do next," said Renzo, stirring restlessly on his couch chair.

"With your approval, Renzo, I intend to go to Lithia on the next ship to the Aries sector," said Marc. "I want to see the Judge."

"What makes you think he'll tell you anything?" Renzo asked.

"I don't know that he will," replied the younger man. "But I believe I can get him to talk—a little. And I might be able to smell out any plan to flood the market with real gems."

"I can send other agents," said the billionaire.

"Right," Marc told him, "but none of them know the Judge. And to date the Greenites have been remarkable for keeping their own secrets. Besides, there's another possible factor."

"What—what is it?" Renzo

asked, prodding the mobile model again to hide any faint show of interest.

"It's probably nothing," said Marc, deciding it was time to play his trump card. "But I have some reason to believe that Judge Robinson may be more than two hundred years old."

The billionaire watched the model slowly cease its intricate revolution. But there was no mistaking the feverish interest that lurked in his large eyes as he said, "Two hundred years?"

"At least." Marc told him of the signature in the history.

"Mmmm," muttered Renzo. Then, "You have told no one else of this, I hope. Remember the radium rush on Antares Three."

"I have told no one but you," said Marc, concealing a smile of triumph. "The next ship leaves for Aries sector tomorrow night. If I am to be aboard I must make arrangements at once."

"Of course—of course you must, doll," said Renzo. "Call on my seneschal for whatever you need. And good luck."

"Thanks, Renzo," said Marc, rising, "Say good-bye to Dr. Donna for me, will you?"

"A pleasure," the billionaire told him.

That night he and Odessa Dulac dined together in her apartment. They said little until the ices were finished, when the Creole beauty pushed her plate away and said, "I'm going to miss you, Marc—more than that, I'm going to worry about you. I wish you wouldn't make the trip, darling."

"Why don't you come with me, honey," said Marc eagerly.

She told him, "Marc, I'd love to—but for your sake I'm not going to go with you."

"A paradox!" Marc said unhappily.

Her lips twitched briefly, then she said, "I don't mean it that way, darling. But think of what Renzo might do if he found you and I had eloped together—especially when you are on his business."

"What could he do?" asked Marc, his eyes narrowing perceptibly.

"I don't even want to think about that," she told him. "No darling, someone must stay here and keep him soothed."

"Don't carry it too far," he said bitterly. "I'm not going to be carrying pleasant im-

ages in my mind. You and Renzo!"

"Better me and Renzo than no you," she replied simply.

Marc pushed the table between them to one side, crossed to her couch chair and took her in his arms.

Odessa shivered. Marc said, "Don't worry, honey—I've got the counters I need for the game."

"I *am* frightened," she whispered. "I never thought I could be—for any man. But Renzo and his minions terrify me."

"As long as you're not worried over me . . ." he told her acridly.

She gripped him convulsively and her eyes were angry on his. "You big damned fool," she told him. "You big adorable meat-head!"

Late the next afternoon, having received his anti-acceleration shots and had his papers cleared, Marc putt-putted out over the shallow surface of Lake Pontchartrain to the thousand-foot spire of the waiting starship, that gleamed golden in the afternoon sunlight.

He was taken aboard in the gangway lift and turned over to a steward by the purser. His quarters quite comfortable, as befitted a special emis-

sary of Renzo Nelson. When the steward left, Marc looked around him, tried the bathroom door.

Donna was sitting on the sole available seat, a pitcher of iced wine at her side. She said, looking up at him impishly, "Hello, sweet, how do you like your stowaway? Not that I'm really a stowaway—I've already paid my passage."

It was quite a trip. Perhaps more because of what Donna didn't do than because of what she did. For Donna she was tractable, pleasant, almost well behaved. This frightened him and put him on his guard more than if she had given way to her usual hell-raising histrionics. A docile Donna was far more sinister than a bitchy one.

There was, of course, no question of his maintaining even a pretense of fidelity to Odessa. He would scarcely have dared—even if the copper-haired physician had not been sportively minded. The implications of her presence on the trip to Lithia were too frightening.

For Renzo to have sent off his personal physician, with his ever-present fears of treachery and death, meant that he regarded Marc's trip

to the Aries-sector planet as vitally important. It also proved something Marc had suspected all along—that his employer was entirely aware of Donna's intrigue with Marc and was prepared to employ it for his own ends.

Donna, of course, played it differently. "Sweetie," she told him, "I couldn't bear the thought of staying with that old necrophobe while you went gallivanting off all over the universe."

"Cut it out, Donna. And don't try to pretend Renzo didn't assign you to come along with me and make sure I wasn't planning to cut any didoes."

"As a matter of strict truth my coming with you was *my* idea. I think it was nice of me, don't you?"

He sighed and shook his head, told her, "I've stopped thinking."

"Then," she said, tracing figure eights on his chest with her forefinger, "it's time you started. Sweetie, Renzo does not *trust* you any more. If you hadn't filled him full of gobbledegook about Judge Robinson being two hundred years old he'd never have let you leave Earth."

"I know," Marc replied, his sensation of being under the paw of some gigantic in-

human mouse rising. "Why do you think I told him?"

She shrugged bare white shoulders and pouted prettily. "I think it was very clever of you, sweet. But Renzo isn't going to believe it forever."

He sat up in the bunk and looked down at her. He said, "Has it occurred to you, Donna, that it just might be true?"

Her laughter was as innocent as the brook it resembled. She sat up and hugged him and said, "Sweetie, that's too delicious! But you don't have to try and fool me. *I'm* not Renzo—*I'm* not afraid to die. Though frankly, I think living is a lot more fun."

"All right," he told her. "Have it your way if you want to."

"And *this* is the way I want it," she replied, her softness enveloping him like some voracious sponge.

A few days later she said, her eyes downcast, "If this real jewel conspiracy you hinted at should prove active, it seems to me it might be more profitable for us to see if we can't work along with them—just a little. Of course, we'll make them pay."

"Baby," he told her, "the real gem conspiracy may or may not exist. Frankly I

doubt it. I'm a hell of a lot more interested in the secret of teleportation and perhaps that of longevity."

They had been in Sol Sector for almost an Earth-year, arranging purchase of needed plant seedlings from the GTL, in return for shipments of Lithian glassware and woodwork. They were a good looking couple, in an almost offensively healthy way. They were polite, amiable, yet completely self-contained. Within themselves, Marc decided, they drew a line across which they would permit no outsider to step.

Donna discussed it with him on the last night before the ship made landfall on Cerberus, whence space-taxis would take them to the planet proper. She said, "They're odd," and actually shivered. Then, "Do you notice how miserable they seem to be on shipboard? They look actually sick to me."

"I think they look almost too healthy for comfort," said Marc.

"That's because you've not had medical training," the redhead told him. She went on to describe various symptoms she had noticed during the trip that lay at the root of her hypothesis. "It's al-

most," she concluded, "as if they were in the early stages of some sort of progressive poisoning. I'm worried about them."

"Sometimes I find it hard to remember you're actually a doctor of medicine, Donna," Marc told her.

To his surprise the girl looked honestly hurt. She said, "I'm sorry, Marc—maybe my life isn't in accord with the vidar children's programs but I *am* a competent physician. If I weren't Renzo would never have hired me and you know it."

"He'd never have hired you unless you'd been a looker too—and a willing looker," Marc told her acidly.

"Please, sweetie, let's not fight—it's our last night out," she said, leaning close against him.

"As you wish," he told her. "It's your war." She was even sweeter that night than she had been during the trip—so sweet and unaffected and seemingly in love that his suspicions were lulled.

The following "day" the big ship landed on Cerberus and the Lithian passengers—consisting of the couple Donna had labeled as ill, Marc, Donna and some exchange personnel for Cerberus Sta-

tion—disembarked. Since the sole moon of Lithia was as dead as Earth's Luna, their brief period of quarantine was spent under plastidomes.

They barely had time for a light meal before boarding the space taxi. Marc, whose thoughts had turned to Odesa, with considerable remorse and self reproach, was barely able to touch his food. So absorbed with his own accusing conscience was he that he failed to notice Donna had withdrawn into some parallel self absorption.

He saw, when they boarded the space-taxi, that it was constructed entirely of plastics and crystal—of some hardness sufficient to endure the tremendous heat and provide the shielding required by passage from satellite to planet. It ran on a simple sodium drive, of a type long since abandoned in other portions of the civilized universe—but it ran swiftly and efficiently.

Free of the confines of starship and satellite station, Marc felt his spirits become unexpectedly buoyant. His thought processes, which had become torpid during the trip from Earth, seemed to take on new vitality, as did his deeper-buried intuitive processes.

He turned to Donna, who was strapped into a seat beside him, and said, "Do you feel it too?" The faint hum of the pulsing motors behind them forced him to raise his voice a notch above normal.

"I feel something," she replied. "In fact, I feel wonderful—and I shouldn't." She paused, wet her lower lip with a pink darting tongue, added, "Sweetie, why can't we join forces and play our own game? It's our last chance."

"As bad as that, is it?" he asked her softly.

"You seem to think it's some sort of game!" she said angrily.

"Isn't it?" he countered. Then, "Thanks, baby, but I'm not falling into any of your traps this late in the day."

"You're a fool," she said and turned away to look out the quartz window—but not before he had seen the tears in her eyes.

He wondered about them but not for long—because the big planet was rushing at them, filling the sky, turning itself inside out, then flattening as they drew swiftly in for a landing. Their destination was New Pergamum, a city on the middle north coast of Valhalla. Marc found himself wondering a little about

the heterogeneous use of all sorts of classical names by the Greenites, both for themselves and also for their homelands.

Their faith, of course—if it could be called a faith—rested on a combination of pre-Christian morality, with its lack of any sense of guilt or shame, with a thoroughly Christian conscience. That much he had learned from his reading of the history book he had taken out of Judge Robinson's shelves back in Sand Mountain. The book was packed in his single piece of luggage. He intended to return it to the Judge.

New Pergamum leaped at them from out of the patchwork of woods and fields beneath them—a small city of wood and glass and plastics that gleamed in the sunlight of late afternoon. As they slowed to land on the glassy surface of the spaceport at one end of its square mile of buildings Marc felt his sense of well-being increase.

But with it rose the sense of danger—no longer something to be met in the future but very much present and threatening. Never before in his memory had his unlisted senses drummed such an urgent warning. He glanced at

Donna, met her eyes, read confusion in them.

Danger was with Donna, of course—but she was not the great threat he felt. It lay somewhere beneath them, outside the space-taxi that was even then skimming in for a perfect landing beneath a domed blue sky. Marc found himself wishing he were armed.

He felt something pressed into his hand. Looking down he saw it was a derri-blaster, one of the tiny weapons, deadly at close range, that had long since been outlawed on Earth. He looked up at Donna, lifted his eyebrows, said, "What's this for?"

"To give you a chance, you fool," she replied.

The space-taxi sprouted wings and landing gear to touch the glassine surface without a jar and glide gently to a stop in front of a low pleasant building. They emerged from the taxi into pleasant breeze-swept sunlight and a springtime temperature in the mid-eighties.

Donna nodded toward the two Lithians who had accompanied them from Earth. They were standing about fifty feet from the space-taxi and the Lithian woman's long light-brown hair was

ruffled pleasantly by the breeze. A little knot of dignitaries, colorful in gay shirts and shorts and tunics, was marching in loose order from the low airport building to greet them. Evidently their errand on Grandmother Earth was deemed important to Lithia and had been successfully concluded.

"They're not sick any more," said Donna, looking up at Marc. A jumble of medical terms followed, ended in puzzlement.

"If you're puzzled why ask me?" Marc countered. "I don't know a teledrendron from a metatarsal arch."

Her round little mouth opened and her blue-green eyes went wide. Then her look became hyper-acute, even for Donna. She said, "Never mind, darling. I was just wool-gathering."

"A likely story," he told her and they moved slowly toward the low building alongside the glittering landing field surface.

From time to time Donna glanced up at him covertly, almost as if she feared him. Marc pretended not to notice but he was bothered—just as he was bothered by the slight weight of the deri-blaster in one side pocket of his shorts—and by the sense

of imminent danger that grew greater with every step he took.

When he met that danger face to face inside the red-wood and glass structure, the shock of its familiarity seemed to dissipate it. Manuel Kin, as olive-skinned and inscrutable as ever, was waiting for them. He said, "Hello, you charming people. Glad you finally managed to make it. I've got our trip all mapped out. Caliban Wilson, here, is going to guide us to the Judge's home."

He pointed to a most villainous looking Lithian, a squat swarthy specimen who looked like all the pirates of the seventeenth century Caribbean rolled into one. Caliban actually bobbed his head and touched his forelock as he came forward to acknowledge the introduction, then muttered something about luggage and darted away.

All the hidden alarm bells in Marc's system began to clang.

They walked the quarter of a mile from the airport building to the lodge-like edifice, surrounded by tree-shaded bungalows, where Manuel had arranged for them to stay. Before they started the Eurasian said,

"This is a very odd planet—very odd indeed. But I rather fancy you'll enjoy yourselves here."

"I hope so, Manuel," said Donna abstractedly. "Aren't they going to get us some sort of a cab?"

"No taxis," said Manuel, smiling his half-smile. "That is one of the odd features of the planet I mentioned."

"You didn't mention it," countered Donna. "Oh, dear!"

"Caliban will carry your luggage," Manuel informed her.

The burly native picked up their light luggage awkwardly and moved ahead of them along a street shaded by trees that, to Marc, had a familiar Louisiana semi-tropical look. Although the air around them was warm there was a faint but constant breeze and the trouble shooter from New Orleans felt his exhilaration increase.

Turning to Manuel he said, "This world is a real bracer."

Manuel shrugged his bouffant shoulders. "I don't find it so," he said. "I've found myself rather enervated, old chap."

"You're joking!" said Donna in disbelief.

The three of them shared a three-bedroom cabin that, while rustic, was entirely

comfortable and well appointed, Marc was conscious while he unpacked his vegajax bag of stirrings of vast and unaccustomed activity beneath his cortical level. For a moment he wondered if he were not becoming telepathic all at once.

Naturally he dismissed the idea as absurd. Yet it felt to him he could almost hear Donna's thoughts on the other side of the wooden wall that separated their rooms. She seemed to be thinking . . . "I'll have to have the gray tunic pressed and cleaned . . . Oh dear, I wondered what Manuel has planned for Marc . . . Poor Marc, if only he weren't so . . ." At that point her thoughts faded briefly.

But Manuel's thoughts came through the wall on the other side. He seemed concerned with Donna's loyalty, with how much Marc might know. . . . "If that stupid playboy hasn't arranged his own contacts . . . They won't stand for murder on this crazy planet . . . Wonder if that little slut Donna is playing her own game? . . . Better not or she'll wind up in the bouillabaise with her jerk friend Marc . . ."

And underneath, all the time, the thrumming beat of danger.

Marc decided he was going off his rocker—then grinned and reassured himself that his overstimulation was the result of contact with a new atmosphere. He was merely guessing at the thoughts of his companions and simulating what he supposed them to be in his own mind.

The dining room was pleasant. There were a few other Earthfolk, mostly uniformed men and women from Cerberus station, and a goodly number of appallingly healthy Lithians present. Outwardly all was amiably serene. But over a strange and stimulating vegetable cocktail Marc could not resist saying to Donna, "Honey, do you think you'll have time to have the gray tunic cleaned?"

"It'll be back in the morning," the girl replied automatically. Then, suddenly, her eyes widened with what looked like fright. She opened her mouth to say something—but Marc cut her off by turning to Manuel.

He said, "Better keep your eye on Donna, Manuel—she proposed some truly scandalous schemes to me during the passage."

Manuel smiled. "Don't worry, old chap," he said. "I know Dr. Donna very well

indeed—she's a jolly clever young lady."

"Think she can keep out of the bouillabaise?" Marc asked.

It was Manuel's turn to look warily at Marc. But Marc ordered another round of drinks and asked the Eurasian about Lithia. "Tell me," he inquired, "how these people get about if they don't use vehicles?"

"That," Manuel replied, "is the sixty-four-hundred-credit question. Oh, they have a few air-cars—I've hired one from Caliban for our journey to Judge Robinson's home tomorrow. But most of them have no vehicles of any kind."

"Teleportation?" Marc asked softly.

"If they have it they don't talk about it," replied the Eurasian.

They ordered dinner and, when the waiter had departed, Marc inquired, "What about a real-gem conspiracy—find any more evidence?"

Manuel looked doubtful, replied, "I've seen some of the damndest biggest pearls in the universe—seen the sea-beasts that breed 'em too. But I have yet to find evidence of the sort of conspiracy you were moved to suggest back on dear old Terra, chappie."

"That was guesswork,"

Marc admitted. He engaged in no further serious conversation while the soup—a delicious bisque of Lithian seafoods and vegetable juices—and the entrée—a steak whose succulence and flavor exceeded by far that of any similar meat on any of the other planets he had visited—were served and enjoyed.

Then he caught Manuel looking at a table to his left, followed the assassin's gaze, spurred by a sudden hunch that was more than a hunch. He was in time to see a Lithian woman cause a shaker of some sort of seasoning to move across the table to her hand, apparently without apparent volition. He must have stared, for the woman's companion caught him and spoke to her. She flashed a covert glance in his direction, then reddened and bent embarrassed over her plate.

"I know, old man," said Manuel. "It's enough to drive you plumb barmy. I'm beginning to think you were absolutely right."

"It's funny—since it isn't generally known around the universe," remarked the trouble shooter thoughtfully. "There don't seem to be any very strict regulations for tourists to Lithia."

"Don't delude yourself for

a moment, old boy," said Manuel. "You're screened from the moment you plan to leave Earth and come here. Space-transfers without clearance delays are not visaed. And the espionage here is perfect. Every time you take a breath they know it. Don't ask me how they do it but they do."

"Odd—I haven't felt I was being watched," said Donna, casting an accusatory glance at Marc, who returned it unblinkingly.

"Don't worry—you are," Marc told her. "This is a planet that keeps its secrets."

"Aren't you afraid of finding out too much, Manuel darling," the redhead asked sweetly. "Perhaps they might not let you go."

For a fractional instant Manuel's rigid self control slipped and Marc felt as if he were gazing at the bare skull of a savage. As if the emotions were his own he could feel fear, guile, craft, avarice, hatred coursing through him.

A barrier dropped mercifully to shut out the ulcer-breeding current. Manuel's face resume its usual impassivity. He said, "I'd like to see these blokes try to hold me here against my will."

"I'll let you in on a secret,"

whispered Donna, leaning forward across the table. "I'd like to see them try it too."

"You're utterly daft," remarked Manuel with casual contempt.

Since New Pergamum offered little in the way of nocturnal amusement and Manuel had planned an early start for the morrow the three of them returned early to their rustic cabin. Marc was glad of the opportunity to be alone with his thoughts—but soon found he was anything but alone. When he managed to shut out the menace of Manuel, Donna's confused and troubled thinking remained in his head.

With a half-smile in the darkness he tried another test. He thought about Donna carnally, then silently expressed relief at being rid of her for the night after their intimate trip from Earth together. He managed to project a highly unflattering vision of the girl.

Immediately he got an angry return. ". . . You don't need to think you're such a prize, you big goon!" it came—and with it a vision of himself that made him wince. In spite of himself he began to laugh and for this he received a mental slap in the face that actually made him cry out.

He slapped back and felt like a brute.

But, moments later, he got a worried query. "... Marc, sweet, what's happening to us? I can read your thoughts."

"I can read yours," he returned silently, "so watch yourself. I think it must be the planet. It's affected us some way."

"It doesn't seem to have affected Manuel," she replied. "And I can't read him as easily as I can you."

"Maybe it only works with simple open-minded people like you and me," was his reply. He could almost hear Donna giggle.

Then, more serious, she transmitted, "Be careful, darling. Whatever Manuel has planned will happen tomorrow."

He found that by not thinking about either of his companions he could shut out their thoughts. And, by testing, he discovered that he and Donna could shut out each other's. They said silent good nights and he lay in the darkness, considering the strange new talent he had acquired.

He wondered if the planet were responsible in some strange way, then wondered if his own new powers were limited to telepathy—not that

this gift didn't offer problems enough. He concentrated on the plastic light switch at the side of his bed, willed it to turn.

It didn't work and he was about to give up when, unexpectedly, the light went on. He reached to turn it off, then lay back and willed it off. The light vanished. Marc tried it again, turned it off again. All at once his bedroom door was flung open.

"Anything wrong, old man?" asked Manuel.

"Just trying to find my barbiturates," said Marc, who had never taken a sleeping pill in his life. Manuel hesitated, then disappeared, closing the door behind him.

Manuel had them up sometimes with the gentle Lithian dawn. He said, over a bitter coffee-like drink and plum-like fruits of red-and-green-dapple, "We've got about four thousand miles to cover and these sodium-drive Litnian air-cars can't do over eight hundred top."

"Where does Judge Robinson live?" Marc inquired casually.

"He's got a place on one of the smaller islands of the Elysian Archipelago," Manuel informed them. "He seems to be quite a grand mogul on

this planet—quite the top-toff."

"The Judge is a good fellow," said Marc amiably, forcing himself to eat despite the increased sense of personal peril that gnawed at the base of his brain.

"He shouldn't have let Itchy go to quod," said Manuel.

"Oh," put in Donna, "maybe the old boy couldn't help it. Maybe he had to get out here and couldn't wait for the trial."

"Besides," said Marc, "Renzo must have got poor Itchy out of the calabozo by this time." He rubbed casually the fine linen napkin across his lap, making sure the derri-blaster was still in one of his shorts' side pockets. He had a feeling he was going to need it.

Caliban Wilson shambled up and informed them the air-car was fueled and waiting. It was a transparent vehicle of polarized plastic, offering perfect viewing in all directions and shelter from the rays of what was beginning to look like a very hot sun.

"Judge Robinson's?" Caliban asked with a meaningful grin. "Right?"

"Right, Caliban, old chap,"

said Manuel, leading the way into the odd vehicle. He sat on the left side, behind Caliban, while Donna and Marc sat in the right hand seats, fore and aft. They took off silently but with unaccustomed slowness, rising above the thinly settled continent and soaring off northwestwardly over serene turquoise waters.

When they were three hours out Caliban produced a hamper from beneath his pilot's chair and emerged with a cold roast fowl that tasted like a combination of turkey and pheasant, along with a delicious yellow bread and various exotic fixings. "You've arranged things in style, Manuel," said Marc appreciatively.

"I always try to, old chap," replied the Eurasian. "If you can't do things well, don't do them at all is my motto."

Marc found it difficult to think of anything further to say. He wondered more than a little at the combination of currents that had caused him to place himself in so precarious a position. It was probable, he knew from various thought flashes he had caught in Manuel's mind, that the assassin had no intention of letting him talk to Judge Robinson.

Renzo, of course, would

have considered such a conference, so far removed from his direct authority, a highly dangerous procedure. Marc surmised, in view of Manuel's fear of reprisals for murder on Lithia, that he was to die in a simulated accident of some sort. Then Donna would call on the Judge and extract whatever information she could from him. That, Marc thought, would be a conference he'd like to witness. Surprisingly he had been able to discover little in the red-head's mind of the conspiracy against himself, he wondered why.

"... Because ..." came her thought, "... Manuel doesn't trust me. Don't worry—I'm not going to let him kill you."

For a wild instant, as the air-car began to descend toward a wild-looking island, Marc considered attempting to use his new-found extra-sensory powers to extricate himself from his difficulty. But he felt too unsure of them, and of his ability to handle them. Instead, his hand roved again toward the tiny blaster Donna had given him.

He wondered if the blaster were a booby trap, cunningly introduced to him by the girl so that he could destroy himself when defense seemed im-

perative. And for the second time he got his face slapped mentally. Donna's neck grew red once more.

"... It's all right, honey. I've got to think of everything ..." he transmitted. "... This is a hell of a time to get sensitive ..."

Her apology was so unexpected, so tremulous, that he actually sent her a thought of encouragement. Then there was little time for telepathy as Caliban Wilson brought the air-car down on the satin surface of a sapphire lagoon and taxied over the water toward a narrow beach of pure white sand, backed by a wall of dark green jungle.

"Well, this is it," said Manuel. "The Judge's house is over the rise through the trail ahead. I'll walk you there."

Marc studied him briefly—he could read grim determination and wary alertness masking all other thoughts in the Eurasian's head—and then rose slowly and left the air-car, giving Donna's bare shoulder a squeeze as he slid past her.

Marc wondered how the assassin had the nerve to operate with a Lithian in the vehicle—surely he must have an inkling of the strange mental powers of the planet's

citizens. Or perhaps Manuel, with his genius for the devious and corrupt, had managed to get a hold he felt certain Caliban could not afford to break.

They topped the rise, passed on downhill with exotic jungle growths pressing in on them. Once their progress startled a huge flying reptile, ugly as a prehistoric pterodactyl of Earth, which spread leathery wings and flew off toward the sun, squawking protests at the strange creatures that had frightened it from its perch.

Marc, his hands in his pockets, finally turned. Manuel, about thirty feet behind him, also stopped and said, "What's the matter?"

"This is as far as I'm going," Marc told him. "You might as well kill me here." He had his thumb on the discharge button of the derri-blaster in his shorts pocket, planned to shoot through the cloth when the moment came. Never having before killed a man, he hesitated and the moment was gone almost before it arrived.

Covering him with casual efficiency, a full-sized hand-blaster produced by some legerdemain from a concealed holster, the Eurasian said, "I guess this will do as well as

any place, chum. The pteranodons will pick your bones clean in a day."

Marc opened his mouth to speak, closed it in consternation as Donna came stumbling, running, along the path over the brow of the hill. In her hand she held a twin to the derri-blaster she had given him. She cried, "Manuel—*don't!*" as she took in the scene before her.

Manuel turned slowly and at that instant the redhead fired—and missed by a good two feet. Marc saw the brief blast of her miniature weapon flicker its heat through the air, then fade out as it spent itself. Coolly Manuel leveled his larger blaster, evidently intending to blow the girl to bits.

Manuel aimed—and Marc's mind was full of Donna's desperate panic. He received an all-encompassing desire on the redhead's part to be elsewhere, anywhere away from the deadly flared muzzle of the ray-weapon the assassin had aimed on her, dead center.

Manuel said coldly, "I've been expecting something like this, young lady." His forefinger tightened around the trigger and again the air flickered with a sudden dead-

ly directed blast of sheer heat.

And Donna vanished. It was almost as if she had been wiped out by one of the disintegrators military scientists had been vainly seeking for more than a century. One instant she was there, facing death. The next instant she—wasn't.

For a moment or two the tableau was set. Manuel, his lips drawn back slightly to reveal twin rows of yellow teeth, stared foolishly at the void where his target had stood. Marc stared at the empty spot then at the Eurasian. And then he came out of it to discover he had drawn the derri-blaster from his pocket, was aiming it at Manuel.

This time he pressed the tiny button that discharged the weapon. He felt the slight jerk as it was activated, saw the air in front of him flicker, noted with odd detachment that the tiny weapon's insulation was not sufficient to keep it from warming against his palm.

Like Donna, he missed his target. As Manuel, alarmed, pivoted to face the new threat, Marc saw one of the Eurasian's absurdly puffed shirt shoulders crisp into nothingness. Then his weap-

on was spent and he was flinging himself desperately into the jungle brush beside the trail in an effort to avoid the blast the assassin was directing at him. Rough vines whipped at his face and he felt a tremendous fist slash at his right thigh before the now-burning bushes enwrapped him.

"I've got to get out of here!" he thought desperately. "I've got to get away before he finishes me off!"

He had a sudden sensation of being caught in a fruit mixer, then thudded to earth and felt his wind knocked out as he fell backward on a dead log that caught the small of his back.

As his breath came back with a rush he lay there weakly and managed a grin. Like Donna, he had teleported himself!

He had not gone far. Somewhere in the distance he could hear Manuel cursing with low bitter fluidity in a half dozen tongues. He forced himself to lie still, in spite of the agony that was beginning to course through his right upper leg, lest he betray his position.

Not until he was sure the assassin had given up did he rise to a sitting position and check on the damage Manu-

el's blaster had done him. It was not in itself serious—though painful. The ray had bitten a two-inch strip of flesh out of the side of his thigh. He doubted that even a small skin-graft would be needed. But unless he could get medical attention infection was sure to follow.

He wondered where Donna had got to, sent his thoughts coursing out after her. Unexpectedly, in the crisis, the redhead had proved her loyalty to him. He reproached himself for never having suspected her of having concern for anyone save herself. Then, again, he sent his wandering thoughts out in search of her. In vain—either Donna was unconscious or she had passed the radius of his telepathic power.

Later Marc decided he must have fainted. At any rate the next thing he became aware of was the fact that he was no longer alone. The girl read his start of awareness correctly—or rather his thought. She said, "There's nothing to fear, Marc Thaw. I've come to take you to a place of safety."

Her mind was open to his and in it he read curiosity, sympathy and a desire to help. Through her thoughts

he was able to envision a cool white wood-and-plastic residence, soft white linen and medication. He said, "I hope it's not far—I'm not sure of my teleportation. As you must know, Arethusa Jones"—he knew her name without asking, of course—"I'm a stranger here myself."

She laughed and he realized that his personal Florence Nightingale was an extremely healthy and pretty young Lithian. Like all on her planet she appeared strong and graceful and her figure brought to his mind a tune from one of the ancient Rogers and Hammerstein operettas—*June Is Busting Out All Over*.

"Come on," she said, all business, "you're hurt, Marc Thaw. We've got to get your leg treated. Don't fear—it's not far."

He closed his eyes and opened his mind and let her direct his thoughts. He saw once more the cool white house and again the soft linen sheets. His thoughts whirled briefly again and he actually seemed to feel the linen against his naked skin.

He opened his eyes and discovered that he was lying in bed. His leg no longer pained him and groping fingers informed him that the wound

had been covered with some sort of bandaheal whose potent restoratives were already doing their work. He smiled his relief.

"Good, you're awake. I was beginning to worry." It took him an instant to realize Arethusa Jones, perched on a low cushioned settee by the wide window through which sunlight filtered, had not spoken.

He said, "Tell me, Arethusa, why I'm able to hear your thought—and how in hell I was able to teleport so suddenly."

She said, "Grandfather will tell you. I'll go get him now." She darted away.

The man who came in looked incredibly old—his frame was thin and bent, his face dried and brown and wrinkled like a pickled walnut—but health and vitality moved with him like an aura. He smiled at Marc, who marvelled at the whiteness of his teeth and the brilliant blue of his deep-sunk eyes.

He stood over Marc and looked down at him and said, "I'm Perseus Green. I'm glad you are better. You've caused us considerable trouble, Marc, but if it's brought you here we are grateful."

Marc propped himself up

on his elbows and stared as if at a ghost. He said aloud, "You're not—you can't be—the original Perseus Green! That would make you close to four hundred years old!"

The ancient's thought stream told Marc, "Don't talk—there's no need for it and it will only tire you. Yes, I'm the original Perseus Green. Does the fact surprise you so completely?"

Marc thought it over, shook his head. "I suppose not," he replied without speaking. "After all, Judge Robinson's inscription in the volume I took from his Sand Mountain home gave me a clue."

"The Judge—my nephew—thought it might have when he found the book missing," said the patriarch gravely. "He had always felt that you had possibilities of becoming a useful Lithian—your natural talents along our lines were considerable."

Marc knew instantly what Perseus Green meant—he was referring to what Marc had always respected as instinct or hunch. He frowned and asked, "Why is it that such psi talents flourish so on Lithia? I never could read thoughts before—nor could I teleport."

"The answer is simple," Perseus Green told him.

"This is the only planet yet discovered that is entirely suited to animal life—which of course includes Man. The cause of its isolation is also the basis of our extraordinary development here."

Marc was puzzled. He considered the cause of Lithia's exclusion from the main stream of interplanetary development. He said, "If you mean the lack of usable metal I'm afraid I don't see how..."

"Fortunately few humans do," the sect founder replied. "However it is so. Humanity is mad for metal—yet metal is as poisonous to life as the arsenic made from some of it. I'll try to explain."

"Please do—I'd be grateful," said Marc, sitting upright.

"As luck would have it," began the ancient man, "I was born in a part of Northern New England where metal in the soil is virtually nonexistent—in the granite and gravel hills of New Hampshire. In my time this country was thinly settled, even as it is today.

"The cornerstone of my belief was far from a divine visitation—quite the contrary. It was a revolt against so-called 'divine' biddings I found myself utterly unable to accept. I revolted against

the grim prim morality to which my fellows gave lip service, to the concept of guilt and the blackmail of hell and purgatory, the sugar candy of heaven.

"I managed to read back to the doctrines of pre-Christian eras under the excuse of studying the classics." The old man's withered mouth twitched in a reminiscent smile. "And from them I learned another set of doctrines—that life should be lived to the full as the only known existence any of us have. I found others—a few—who shared my distrust of the dogma crammed into us on every side.

"We sought to combine a healthy pagan hedonism with the Golden Rule—and found ourselves in hot water." He sighed. "Fortunately we were young and determined to live our lives according to our own concepts. We went west and thrived—and were driven out again, this time to Arizona. We believed in hard work, hard play and plenty of rest."

"I wish I'd been one of you," said Marc.

"Had you been born then you might well have been—if what my nephew has told me about you is true," said the patriarch. "It was the

vary barren-ness of our reservation that gave us our growth."

"I don't understand," said Marc, puzzled. "Unless you mean that in making a desert fertile you learned new methods of living."

"That was not the chief factor in our development. We were allowed to keep our reservation without interference largely because there was absolutely no useful metal beneath that sandy arid soil.

"It was there that I and a few others began to develop what you choose to call psi qualities. Perhaps the region of my birth was a help—in New Hampshire people live long and some of them have been noted for odd talents despite their hard-headed tradition.

"In Arizona several of us found we could read minds. I ordered books and began to study the legends and histories of so-called wise men, from Buddha and Confucius on down through the ages. In most instances, where there seemed to be truth behind legend and the so-called prophets or wise men were successful, I learned that they had flourished during retirement to remote districts, far from the lodes of

metal that draw men into community living."

"You mean that metal inhibits mental power?" Marc asked.

"It inhibits not only mental power but life itself," Perseus Green informed him. "Metal is poison to life and Earth is a poison planet. When present in quantities sufficient to do harm it atrophies in time that part of the brain that gives mankind freedom. Children often possess remarkable psychic gifts—only to lose them as they grow older and the poison does its work."

"What a thought!" exclaimed Marc.

"But true, alas," the patriarch told him. "As we developed our talents we learned the secret of teleportation, both personal and external. And, fearing lest our secret be discovered on Earth and ourselves again be driven from our homes, we sought a planet better suited to live. We searched space and we found Lithia."

"And with Lithia immortality," Marc murmured.

Perseus Green shook his ancient head. "No," he said. "Not immortality—longevity. Our life-span is indefinitely extended but we do age—and in time we shall die if accidents do not kill us before

our span is done. But we have reason to believe the human life-span extends between six and seven hundred years. We are not pressed for time—we have it. Hence the violence of hasty ambition is not a factor in our society. We have liberty to enjoy ourselves and each other."

"It sounds almost ideal," said Marc thoughtfully.

"Nothing is ideal," replied the old man. "New conditions bring new problems. We must be extremely careful about children, for instance, or we should be overrun with them as Australia was once overrun with jackrabbits. We have had to abolish monogamy—on Earth each person could make his own choice. Can you imagine anyone wanting to be tied to the same mate for five or six hundred years?"

Marc shuddered again and thought-croaked, "What a ghastly idea! You'd have a wave of murders if you tried it that way."

"We have had no murders in almost two centuries," the patriarch told Marc. "Your difficulty with Renzo Nelson's agent was the first violence we have known in that time. When near-eternity is every man's lot he learns to respect

the lives of others." He paused to study his guest.

"You know about Renzo—and Manuel?" the visitor inquired.

Perseus Green nodded gravely. "There are no secrets on Lithia," he said. "How could there be?"

"What has happened to Manuel—and to Donna?" Marc asked him.

"Your Manuel will soon land again at New Pergamum," the old man told him. "He is a sadly frightened young man." He added, "The young lady, who seems to have adapted to our planet, has been found and conveyed to a place of safety. She will be here tonight."

"Thanks," said Marc. "I was worried about her. But I should think you'd be afraid of what an assassin like Manuel could do here."

"What can he do?" countered the sect-founder. "We can forestall his every move. And he cannot read our minds."

"Why is that, Mr. Green?" Marc inquired.

"Unfortunately or otherwise," replied his host, "some people manage to poison their own minds and selves through fear and inversion of thought to a point where their psi qualities are de-

stroyed as effectively as by life in a uranium mine. We made this discovery when we first tried to teleport our entire colony to Lithia."

"I see," said Marc. "But I've always been a pretty selfish sort. Why haven't I destroyed my own talents?"

"Actually you have never been selfish," he was informed. "And it is not so much selfishness as the fear resulting from it that causes atrophy. You have never been afraid. Nor has your young lady."

"With that I'll agree," mused Marc. Then, "But I've lived in Earth cities most of my life. Why weren't my psi talents destroyed by contact with metal?"

"Probably because they were unusually strong," the patriarch told him gravely, "along with the fact that your early life was spent largely in the country. And, more recently, how much metal do you think the GTL has left in any Earth city, including New Orleans?"

"Of course," said Marc. "May I tell you that, in my brief time on Lithia, I've felt better and freer than ever before in my life?"

"I'd hoped you would," replied the patriarch. "We have

need of fresh blood, new backgrounds here."

"I hope then you'll let me stay—and Donna," said Marc.

"We shall be glad to," Perseus Green told him. "I think you will find, as time goes by, that you'll be able to develop new talents and new knowledge and become a valued contributor to our culture."

"I shall feel honored," Marc told him. Suddenly he was overwhelmed with a sense of guilt. He had forgotten completely about Odessa. He felt like a traitor as he thought of her, condemned to live out her brief life on Earth. Why, with such longevity, the difference in their ages would no longer be a factor to prevent marriage!

The patriarch regarded him with a faint wise smile. He said, "Your other young lady shall have a chance to prove her adaptability."

"Thanks—thanks again," said Marc, blushing. "I hope it won't take too long to get her here."

Perseus Green looked at him, no longer smiling. He said, "She will arrive here this evening—rather at New Pergamum. She and Renzo Nelson followed you from Earth on a special ship."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Marc. "I've betrayed you to Renzo. What are you going to do about him and Manu-el?"

"We're going to watch them, of course," said the patriarch with an enigmatic smile. "I don't believe they'll be able to cause us much trouble. Now I must leave you—I am wanted on the Eastern continent."

He smiled and vanished. Involuntarily Marc let out a cry of alarm. At once the comely Arethusa Jones was there, asking him mentally if anything were the matter. He gave her a negative reply and she perched on the edge of the bed and studied him.

She said, silently of course, "I'm glad you came here, Marc Thaw. You're very glamorous—and strange. I think I love you."

"I'm no prize," he told her in frantic self-defense. "You'd better stick to one of the young men of Lithia."

She sighed and told him, "You're much too young to be thinking such old thoughts. Why, you're just at the interesting age for a man. I'm sick to death of youths. They're so callow."

"So are you," he told her bluntly but something of his involuntary male reaction to

her fresh young comeliness must have crept in to her thoughts.

She was suspiciously demure as she replied sadly, "I know. And on Lithia it takes practically forever to grow up. Oh, well . . ."

This was an angle of longevity that had not previously occurred to him—it must be rough on adolescents. She thought about kissing him anyway as he lay there but he caught her thought and warned her off with his own. She stuck out a pink tongue at him as she slipped from the room.

Teleportation, of course, was the key to Lithia's lack of industry or transportation. Most of Man's mightiest handiworks have been aids to transportation or shelter against the dangers such aids incurred upon him. Able to go anywhere they wished in the universe, the citizens of Lithia had no need of air-cars or space-ships. The few they kept, Marc suspected, were merely to delude rare visitors.

And their ability to move external objects at will would eliminate the need for most other machines. He wondered if a single brainpower were enough to transport and shape the materials needed

to erect and furnish a house like the one in which he now lay. If not, they probably ganged together and used the power of several brains.

Lithia was a wonder planet—the perfect environment for Man, in which his own powers were sufficient to make it work on a high level of comfort and civilization, without the brutalizing effects of heavy industry and machines. He made up his mind then that he was going to spend the rest of his days there.

Donna—well, Donna had already proved herself. And as for Odessa, the thoughtful, the exquisite, he had no doubt that she would adapt as well to the freer environment. Having the two of them on Lithia at once, without the constricting influences that had made the triangles feasible if difficult on Earth, was going to be a problem. But longevity would solve it in time—in time. He was going to have a lot of time.

He worked his injured leg and it gave him no soreness. Part of this, he knew, was due to the healing drugs with which the bandaheal was impregnated—but he was running no fever, felt no infec-

tion working in his veins. He got out of bed and examined the wound in the inner-door pier-glass of the bathroom that adjoined his room.

The bandaheal, a neat white oval, clung easily to his thigh, would remain there until the damaged flesh beneath it grew whole. He regarded the trim muscular leanness of his figure, found it not wanting, looked up to see the reflection of Arethusa standing behind him, regarding him like a cat looking through a butcher-shop window.

He said, "Get me some clothes. I'm going to get up."

"You're cuter without them," she flashed back impudently and he turned quickly, lifting his arm. With a squeak and a giggle she darted off, returned with a handsome lightweight pair of maroon shorts and loose yellow shirt, trimmed with maroon piping.

He got into them and wandered through the open comfortable house, finding it pleasant. For the patriarch of a planet it was unpretentious—but it would have surprised him had it been otherwise. The nubile Arethusa followed him about like a kitten, finally sat him down in a couch-chair on a broad

roofed terrace and brought him a long cooling drink.

He was still trying to answer her machine-gun questions about life on Earth when Judge Robinson, looking scarcely a day older than Marc remembered him, appeared out of nowhere. His former mentor expressed concern over his injury, said, "I'm afraid I owe you an explanation, Marc. My recent behavior seems to have caused you a great deal of trouble—but if it has finally brought you to Lithia, I'm extremely glad. I've always felt you should be one of us."

"I already feel like one of you," replied Marc. "But I would like to know a thing or two about what's been going on."

"And so would I," said Donna, materializing suddenly and regarding Arethusa with all the friendliness of a strange cat.

Marc performed the introductions and gave the red-head a quick resume of what had happened to him since the encounter in the island jungle. Donna regarded him with resentment for being alive.

"Here I've been worried sick about you," she said and he noticed that already she

had dropped vocal speech in favor of telepathy. "I thought you were dead. I couldn't reach you anywhere."

"What happened to you when you vanished?" Marc asked her, slipping an arm around the familiar firm softness of her shoulders.

"I came to under water," she replied. "It scared me into taking another long flying leap. This time I tried for you but I couldn't reach you, so I thought of the only other person on Lithia I'd ever heard of—the Judge. That took me to his home on the next island."

"Your young lady quite startled me," said the mentor. "I'd rather been expecting you, Marc. I'm sorry we let you suffer so much but we had to know how far Manuel would go. Anyway, Caliban was on hand to see that neither of you was seriously hurt. That was why we gave him the assignment to be Manuel's chauffeur."

"I've got a question, Judge," said the unabashed red-head. "I want to know how this whole business of our being here got started. If you hadn't failed to show up at Itchy's trial . . ."

"That was a misjudgment on my part," Judge Robinson told them. "It never occurred

to me, especially with you on the case, Marc, that our scientific young friend would not be acquitted—or that you'd be able to figure out that I brought him to Lithia that night."

"Why'd you do it, Judge?" Marc asked. "And why in heaven's name was poor Itchy framed with that model train theft?"

The Judge hesitated, then replied, "I'm afraid it was necessary. I had to bring him to Lithia to make sure one of his very important experiments would be applicable to our soil. It wasn't working out quite right. He spotted the nutrient needed at once. Believe me, Marc, life on Lithia is no Utopia. Lack of useful metals may be a vast boon but it also imposes limitations on physical life. We are constantly on the lookout for substitutes. Itchy showed us one."

"You didn't treat him very well," said Donna accusingly.

"If we hadn't given him help in his early years Itchy would never have been able to attain the prominence and success he has achieved," replied the solon. "Unfortunately, he is not a type that can adapt to Lithia. He lacks the necessary faith. Hence I

had to take him back and make sure he never suspected what had happened to him."

"So you arranged that absurd frame-up to keep him busy until he had forgotten the sharp edges of his experience," Marc put in.

"Exactly," said the Judge. "Then I had to come here to report on the potential of Itchy's discovery. There were unexpected delays and by the time I was able to return to Sand Mountain it was too late. Now I doubt that I shall ever go back to Earth."

Arethusa materialized suddenly with a trayful of drinks and they sat about and chatted, waiting for Perseus Green to return. It was a pleasant late afternoon gathering, for all of the occasional suspicious glances Donna darted in the direction of the young Lithian girl.

At one point, when Arethusa was showing the Judge a special plant in her garden, the redhead dumped herself into Marc's lap and kissed him soundly and murmured, "Darling, I've never been so happy. This is heaven. I'm never going to leave and neither are you. Just think—no more intrigue, no more struggle, all this time."

"What about Arethusa?" he asked, grinning at her.

Donna wrinkled her nose, superbly confident. "A girl needs a little competition to keep on her toes," she said. Then, sighing, "Think of it—no more Renzo!"

"Renzo arrives at New Pergamum tonight—with Odessa," Marc informed her. "They followed us out from Earth."

"That cat!" exploded Donna. "I'll scratch out her sloe eyes. Be careful, Marc, or she'll get us both in hot water."

"Oh, come now," said Marc, smiling. "Odessa isn't that bad."

"A lot you know about women," said Donna morosely.

"I've learned quite a little from you," he replied. "Especially when it comes to sleeping potions."

She had the grace to blush. Then, defiantly, she said, "Well, I had to do something. You were too scared of Renzo to make a pass."

They were still at it when the others came back and the conversation again became general. Judge Robinson was explaining how the gift of planetary telepathy made anarchy possible when Perseus Green reappeared and greeted them gravely. Donna cocked her medically-trained

eyes on the patriarch and said, "You look healthy enough to live to be a hundred and fifty."

It got a laugh and the red-head blushed when the sect-founder explained that he was within a decade or two of concluding his fourth century. She tried to argue but relapsed when Judge Robinson admitted to being less than fifty years younger himself.

They dined on food even more simple and nourishing and deliciously prepared than the meal they had eaten at the New Pergamum Inn the night before. And it was while they lingered over the pleasantly bitter neo-caffeine drink afterward that the message came.

Marc didn't receive it as coherent thought. Nor, apparently, did Donna, who shook her head faintly when he lifted an eyebrow at her across the table. But Judge Robinson and Perseus Green and Arethusa seemed to understand the odd mental message and the two older men exchanged a significant glance. Even Arethusa looked serious for once.

Marc caught the interchanges between his host and former mentor that followed.

Manuel had met Renzo Nelson and Odessa Dulac when they landed at the space-port from Cerberus station. The three Earthfolk had gone at once to one of the Inn cabins for a conference. He derived some satisfaction from a visual picture of the assassin with a bandaheal plastered on a damaged right shoulder.

"Good! I'm glad you hurt him!" came Donna's exclamation. Then, "But you should have rubbed the louse out. He tried to kill me."

The others smiled at them and Judge Robinson said, "Not so violent, young lady. We have our own ways of handling unfortunate creatures like Manuel. However, if you failed to understand the message we just received, I'm sorry. For brevity and direct penetration we do have an official thought-code on Lithia."

"I got the sense of the message from the after-exchange," said Marc. "Is there anything I can do."

The Judge said, "It might be wise for you to go to New Pergamum and join the conference, Marc. Remember, it is of vital importance that nothing—serious should happen to Renzo Nelson while he is on Lithia. If he meets with an accident I don't see quite

how we can keep the whole apparatus of the GTL police from descending upon us and exposing our secrets."

"I understand," said Marc with a trace of bitterness that even here, on Lithia, Renzo was sufficiently powerful to rate special treatment. "What about Odessa—what about the young lady with him?"

"We're going to leave the problem of Madam Dulac up to you," Perseus Green informed him. "I know you'll show good judgment."

"If he'd had any judgment where that brunette she-cannibal is concerned, he'd never have got mixed up with her!" Donna's thought was almost strident. "You'd better let me go."

"I fear you're a trifle too—explosive," said the patriarch with a smile that removed any sting from his words. "In this instance we'll have to leave things up to Marc. I'm sure he'll handle it well."

"You're a lot surer than I am!" said Donna acidly.

"I'm not sure of my tele-transportation abilities," Marc offered when they returned to the terrace for his departure.

"All you have to do is think of the Inn and wish yourself there," Judge Robinson told him. "In case you are not yet

ready for so long a jump, my uncle and I will be supporting you with our own minds."

"I'll be supporting you too," put in Arethusa emotionally and thereby earned herself a serpent's glance from Donna.

Marc tried to give the redhead a farewell buss but she managed to turn her head so his lips found her cheek instead of her lips. Over her shoulder he could see Arethusa barely suppress a snicker. Donna must have caught the thought behind it for she suddenly grabbed Marc tightly and planted her lips on his. "*There!*" she thought, "See if either of these other females can match that!"

He untangled himself, mildly embarrassed although he caught no censorious thoughts, then stood alone and closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He thought of the Inn and the cabins under the trees and of Odessa and willed himself to be there. For a moment nothing happened—and then, as he was about to give up, came the spinning sensation.

Before he came out of it he felt a sort of lurch and darting fear paralyzed him. Somehow he knew that Don-

na was trying to sabotage his flight to her rival. Then, in the nick of time, more powerful mental impulses, impulses that stemmed from outside of himself, took hold and lifted him the rest of the way.

He was standing on soft turf, just outside the cabin he and Donna and Manuel had occupied the night before. No lights were on inside but an orange glow came through the darkness from the windows of the second cabin beyond.

He glanced up to see unfamiliar stars peering down at him through the gaps of foliage above him, then made his way silently to the lighted cottage. Standing to one side he peered through the window.

Renzo Nelson was stretched out on a bed. His young-old face was impassive but Marc could see from the little betraying tightnesses at the corners of his mouth and eyes that the billionaire was very angry. Rage and fear streamed from his thoughts into Marc's mind.

From Manuel, sitting upright on the edge of his couch-chair, came nothing but fear. The slightly wounded assassin was insisting to Renzo that he had killed both Marc and Donna, that he had

been unable to get in contact with Judge Robinson.

"You fool!" said the billionaire bitterly. "You were not supposed to destroy either of them until they had pumped the Judge. That was the primary purpose of the entire assignment. I knew Marc was not to be trusted—I knew Donna was intriguing with him—but both were useful to me as long as I needed Robinson's information. Now we may never be able to get it."

"But, Governor, both of them were onto it," Manuel protested. "Marc dared me to kill him and pulled a blaster. Then Donna jumped me and I was forced to get rid of them both."

"You must have betrayed yourself," said Renzo coldly.

"I'm telling you, on this planet they can read your thoughts," said the assassin bitterly. "I didn't have a chance."

"Can you read mine or I read yours—or either of us read Odessa's?" asked the billionaire. "You must think I've gone crazy to fall for such a ridiculous story."

"I'm afraid I can read yours all too well," said Odessa in her low rich voice. She had been reclining out of the range of Marc's vision,

now rose and crossed in front of the window, beautiful, aloof, untouchable. "I'm going outside for a long walk and let you settle it between you."

Marc slipped to the corner of the cottage, prepared to intercept her and spirit her to safety.

But just before Marc thrust himself around the corner he received the full impact of Odessa's thoughts. They stopped him like the ray of a blaster.

"... That swine Manuel—letting Marc be killed! . . . And Renzo, the pig, for allowing Manuel to have the chance! . . . Where do they think I'll be able to find another young man? . . . Not that Marc was so special—but I had him trained. . . . The idiot thought I was some sort of Goddess. . . . In a way I'm glad he's dead. . . . There are others, plenty of them. Let's see . . ."

From the immaculate Odessa's mind flashed a series of portraits of more than a dozen young men of New Orleans, most of whom he knew more or less well. And the manner in which his fastidious lady-love conceived of them was hardly in accord with his own Lily Maid con-

cept of her. He was frightened, disgusted, angered.

Then another thought nudged him with, "Well, what did I tell you, you big dope? She's been Renzo's spy all along. Where do you think she got all this supposed fortune of hers?"

"Donna!" Marc pivoted to find the redhead standing at his shoulder, shadowy in the tree-shaded darkness. He grabbed her and shook her, then began to laugh silently as his sense of humor came to his rescue. He could feel the girl's body vibrate against his own. He said in thought, "You little devil. You nearly sabotaged my jump here!"

"I'm sorry." There was no contrition with the thought. Then, "Well, what are you going to do to clean up this mess?"

"Stick around," he told her as an idea came to him. Since Manuel had reported them both slain and Renzo was evidently very much under Odessa's influence, there was a way out if he could manage it—a way that would get all three of the unwelcome visitors winging back to Earth without betraying any of Lithia's cherished secrets.

"What are you going to do, honey?" Donna's thought

was fierce in its concern and he knew now how lucky he had been.

"Follow my thoughts," he told her, "but whatever happens don't stick your own in. I'm going to send them back to Earth."

He sent his thoughts coarsening the hundred yards or so to where Odessa was walking gracefully along the path under the tropical trees. Again he was stopped briefly by what came out of the languorous brunette's exquisite skull.

". . . Maybe I shouldn't have told him Marc was dangerous. . . . Then we'd never have had to make this tedious trip. One hundred and twenty-three hours in a spaceship with Renzo—ugh! . . . But still, I had to invent another conspiracy to keep Renzo happy. . . . Unless he feels someone is plotting against him he's quite impossible. . . . And I did need the neo-Minaoan redecoration for the apartment or I'd have been hopelessly out of the swim. . . . Well, we can't have everything."

For a moment the barrage ceased and Marc chose it to send his own thoughts shafting through the barrier of her ordinarily non-telepathic

mind. He didn't know that it would work and hoped the environment of Lithia would do the trick.

He said, "You've lost a great deal, Odessa—but after all, you haven't done too badly. What's one Marc Thaw against an apartment redecorated in neo-Minaoan? No, I think you've done very well indeed."

He could sense her paralysis, her shattering fright, felt a tug of elation at his success. She said, "Who—where are you?"

"You know who I am, darling," he told her, repulsed a little tremor from Donna at his use of the endearment. "As to where I am, I'm every where since Manuel blasted me to atoms."

For a moment she rallied, cried aloud, "I don't believe you."

"Don't you?" he countered. He willed himself in front of her, stood looking at her less than two feet away. He saw her eyes grow round and glittering, heard the quick scream that wrenched itself from her alabaster throat.

"Marc!" her whisper was hoarse, pleading. "You're dead."

"I'm dead," he told her, "and you killed me."

"I didn't—Manuel killed

you," she retorted defensively.

"Who told Renzo I was no longer trustworthy?" he countered.

"I didn't realize—I had to do it," she pleaded. "I've always adored you, Marc, but I've had to live too."

"By letting a swine like Renzo caress you?"

"You're not dead," she said suddenly, lunging at him. "The whole thing's some kind of a trick."

He evaded her grasp by teleporting just beyond her reach. Then, when she stopped and gasped, petrified at his method of transport, he said, "You'll notice we're not actually talking. Doesn't that convince you I'm no longer alive?"

She fell to her knees and put her hands out as if to ward him off, then moaned, "What do you want?"

"I want you and Renzo and Manuel to leave Lithia tonight and return to Earth," he told her. "If I ever hear of any of you returning here—and I shall hear of it, don't worry—I'll be back to haunt you. I can travel to Earth as easily as to heaven or hell."

"I'll — do — what — you — ask," she gasped.

"You had better—you've caused enough trouble," he

warned her. "If you don't I'll visit Renzo and tell him you want him to die."

"I won't fail you," she blurted.

"Then prepare your companions for a quick return trip," he told her. With which, for a final effect, he teleported himself out of sight behind a tree, creating the effect of disappearance.

Odessa whimpered and turned to run. But as she took her second step Donna appeared out of nowhere behind her like a red-headed fury and gave her a push so she fell on her nose in the dirt of the path. An instant later she was giggling behind the same tree with Marc, her arms around his neck, her lips reaching up for his.

"Dammit, darling, not yet," he said. "We've got to be sure."

"You're wonderful, honey," she told him, kissing him anyway. "*Mmmmm!* The way you made her grovel on her knees in front of you!"

"You shouldn't have pushed her," Marc chided. "That was childish and you know it."

"Do you mind?" Donna asked him. "After what she's done to you?"

He leaned back against the tree and rubbed his chin and

chuckled and then said, "No, baby, I guess not. She had it coming to her."

"Let's get out of here," said the redhead excitedly. "This part of the fun's over. Let's make some of our own."

"We'd better stick around and make sure they get off Lithia in a hurry," he replied.

Donna pouted. Then she said, "Well, if we've got to wait around we might as well be comfortable." With which she pulled him down beside her in the night-shadow of the tree and promptly went to work on him. He protested that it was neither the time nor the place but he might as well have tried to stop a hungry panther from feeding.

They remained beneath the tree for the rest of the night—until, with the coming of first dawn, the three unwelcome visitors at last departed the cottage, behind Caliban Wilson, who carried their bags. Before he vanished from vision the amateur porter shafted a thought in their direction, saying, "It's all right—they're leaving. We have the situation in hand. Thanks."

Marc and Donna promptly usurped the deserted cottage and fell asleep in each other's arms.

It was the next afternoon before a summons brought them back to Perseus Green's white house in an island of the Elysian Archipelago. Judge Robinson and the Patriarch and, of course, Arethusia Jones were gathered on the terrace, waiting for them.

Judge Robinson smiled his grave kindly smile and said in thoughts, "We are proud of the way in which you handled a delicate situation. Perhaps we might have managed it differently"—he paused to regard them individually—"and when you have lived longer on Lithia you yourselves might have acted in not quite such direct fashion. But Mr. Nelson and his associates are already on their way from Cerberus back to Lake Pontchartrain."

Donna stirred restlessly in her couch-chair and looked at the patriarch. "Mr. Green," she said, "I'd like Marc and me to be married!"

"Whenever you both wish," replied the sect-founder. "Our ceremony, such as it is, consists merely of mutual

assent in front of a magistrate. Do I hear your agreement, Marc?"

"You do, sir," said Marc, reaching out to ruffle Donna's lively copper curls."

"Then you are married," he told them. "Should either of you wish to break it all you have to do is state the fact to any authorized person—any magistrate. After a week's cooling-off time, if either party still wants divorce, it is considered granted."

"You'd better not try it," said Donna, eyeing Marc aggressively.

He grinned at her and said, "Don't worry, darling, I'll never have the nerve."

But, as she leaned across to kiss him Marc caught a sudden quickly-muffled shaft of thought from Arethusia that went, "Oh well, so I'll have to wait ten or twenty years . . ."

He hoped Donna wasn't on the same wave-length. He would probably never find out.

THE END

In all sciences, the errors preceded the truths;
and it is better that they should go first than last.

—Walpole

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